SHORT STORIES

No. 782. Week ending December 26, 1903. [Price One Penny.

"I THREW MY LOVER THE KEY! WOULD HE BE IN TIME TO SAVE ME?"

(A Dramatic, Thrilling Episode from the Story, "AT THE MERCY OF A MANIAC." See inside.)

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Short Stories

No. 782.] [One Penny.

Week Ending December 26th, 1903.

Containing the incident depicted on the cover.

AT THE MERCY OF A MANIAC.

The Thrilling Story of how a Young Girl was Rescued.

"*Staysails, February* 22, 18—.

"Dearest Kate,—'*My Kate*' *you used to be in the old schooldays. You and I have seen too little of each other these last seven years. Whether the fault be mine or yours, let us retrieve ourselves. Come to me on the* 26*th and make a charming addition to my Lenten house party. I hear the most delightful things of your music, and that your two years in Leipsic did wonders for you. Come and verify this, as well as all the other nice things I hear said of you. You will if you are the same old Kate you used to be. Let me know your train, for which I enclose a ticket, and I will drive over to meet you at the station.—Yours, with love and the usual hurry,*

"Fanny Colgate-Rives."

"I want you to go, Kate," said my brother after I had finished reading this letter to him. "I want you to go and have the very best time of your life. Heaven knows you do not get any too much pleasure out of your studies and a lot of stupid pupils, confound them! It is a shame that a woman like you should be wasted on such a life."

"But, dear," I cried, with a quick rush from the piano stool over to the lounge on which he lay before the little open grate. "I am not wasted on you, and really and truly, Tom, I am happier with you than with anybody else in the world." Which was quite true, although Tom and I lived in a flat, six flights up, without a lift. The neighbourhood suited us admirably, unfashionable and inexpensive, bordering close upon the confines of Abingdon Square.

Ever since a crushing reversal of fortune had come upon us, Tom and I had tried to make the best of things, and, truth to tell, we had succeeded, he, as an illustrator of magazine stories, and I as a teacher of music. We both worked hard, and I think that the fact that we did so was the secret of our content, that, and not trying to keep up appearances, which is after all the surest way of letting down one's temper, unless it be to live for acquaintances. We dropped all ours. We had had them by hundreds. And, in their stead, we took up such friends as cared for us for ourselves.

With Mrs. Colgate-Rives' letter of invitation still in my hand, I sat down on the rug in front of Tom, and he began to play with my hair and to blow rings from his cigar through its curls.

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"Kate," he said, after a little, "I wonder if that last remark of yours is quite true?"

"It is quite true," I said, putting my cheek against his hand, "you are the best and dearest of all, and I am always happy with you."

"Oh, what a blarney stone it is!" answered Tom. "But, do you know, my girl, I only half believe you. I cannot help believing that—that——" and he hesitated, as people who are sensitive do when they are treading on delicate ground.

"That what, dear?" I asked very softly, knowing very well what was coming.

"Well, then, I have sometimes thought about Crawford." Seeing that I made no reply, he went on: "Crawford is just the best fellow I know, and it breaks me all up to think that anything should come between you and him."

"But nothing has," I said.

"Yes, something has," he said. "Something has, Kate, and, by Jove, it's an infernal shame, for if ever two mortals ought to be together, it's you and Doctor Dick Crawford."

No response coming from me he continued: "He doesn't come here any more, and he used to be here every day. And the last time he did come, you were cold to a degree. You barely looked at him; you treated him outrageously, really. And, Kate, now that I look back upon it, you were not attractive, sitting up like an iceberg on the piano-stool, playing classical tunes and boring us both to death. What did you do it for? What on earth did you do it for, Kate?" he repeated, putting his hand on my shoulder with something that came very near being a shake.

"Why I treated Dr. Crawford as I did, is a matter of very little consequence either to him or to me," I flung out with a sudden rising inflection to my voice. "But, since you take it so much to heart, I will tell you. It was," I cried, throwing back my head with a tilt, "it was because you and I have made a mistake. He is not at all the kind of man we thought he was, and," with a throb in my voice which I could not control, "he does not care for me, and I have been a fool, a fool," I continued, crushing back the tears, "and the sooner I am cured of my mistake the better."

But for once the sympathy I looked for was withheld.

"Rot—tommy-rot!" was all my brother said.

"It's like a man to take the part of another man."

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"But I don't take his part, he doesn't need it."

"Go on, go on!" I retorted, drawing away from him. "Next, I suppose, you'll be taking her part."

"What!" he cried. "Her part? Do you mean to say, Kate, there is a woman in it?"

I nodded my head in sorrowful triumph.

"Well, then, some meddling idiot has been lying to you, Kate. In all the years he has known you, Dick Crawford has never looked at another woman."

"But he has," I asserted sadly, "I've seen it."

"Go on, tell me about it, Kate."

Once more the kind hand was on my shoulder.

"Well," I said, "the first time I noticed it was at the last Military Tournament. It may have been going on before, but that was the first time he made his admiration for another woman apparent to me. You remember, we three went there together. You had left us, and he and I were laughing and talking together, when, all at once, he became silent, preoccupied. I made some trifling remark to him, to which he made no reply. I saw that he was looking away from me over to one of the boxes. In fact, his eyes were fastened upon a woman who sat there. She was a beautiful woman, exquisitely dressed. A crowd of men were about her, and, although she smiled upon them, yet I could see they bored her. Somehow her eyes never seemed to smile with her lips, but flashed with a cold glitter, as though the tenderness of tears was too little known to them. His gaze was so riveted upon this woman that I was obliged to speak twice to him before he heard me.

"'You seem to find her interesting,' I said.

"When he became aware of my existence, he replied: 'I do, overwhelmingly so, more than I thought she could be,' and, with his gaze still resting on her beautiful face, he went on:

"'I came here to-night because I hoped for this opportunity to see her.'

"His frankness made me indignant."

"Naturally so," said Tom.

"Murmuring something about her beauty, I tried not to betray my agitation. I need not have given myself any uneasiness on that score, for his looks, as well as his thoughts, were still on the mysterious stranger.

"'Who is she?' I said at last.

"This time, not because it was I who had asked the question, but because the woman had left the box, he answered me. He drew his hand wearily across his eyes, as though he had been undergoing a severe mental strain. And then he answered in the tone of one awakening from a dream, 'She is a Hungarian, the Countess Czarmay.'"

"What," said Tom, sitting bolt upright on the lounge, "not the woman they call the Countess Lara?"

"Yes, I remember that was her name. Do you know her, Tom?"

"Only by reputation, and that is quite enough. For if all that is said of her temper and her tantrums is true, wildcats are angelic animals in comparison with the Countess. She is as cruel as she is charming, and as shameless as she is wellbred. She is received at every court in Europe. But, to my mind, there is only one court where such ladies should be received, and that is the police court.

"But, Kate," he said, with a vicious dab at the fire with the poker, "it's preposterous that Dr. Dick," falling into our familiar name for him, "should have any other than a passing interest in such a creature. He is too earnest a fellow, too thoroughly a man of the world, and, above all, too much given over to his profession to go mooning about at a blue-eyed wildcat."

"But he does, all the same," I cried. "Why, he goes to the Opera every night she is there, although he gave us the impression that life was too short to spend his time away from his studies, anywhere but here. He goes to the Opera, and, from my seat in the dress circle, I have seen him, night after night, with that same absorbed, intent look with which he regarded her that night at the Tournament."

"So you might see me looking at every smartly dressed subject for my sketches. Why, hang it! I've followed a woman for miles, just to get the proper effect of her skirt."

"Yes, dear, but this is different. I am not fanciful about it. I tell you the Countess has cast her spell over Dr. Dick, and all that I can do is to cure myself of my folly, and so," I said, "I am going to accept Fanny Rives' invitation."

"Well," at last said Tom, "if it is true, but, mind you, Kate, I do not say it is true, Dick Crawford is the fool, not you, and I am glad matters have gone no further between you than they have."

"Tom is right," I said to myself, as I put my braided locks down on my pillow that night. "It certainly is fortunate that I did not commit myself to a formal engagement of marriage to Dr. Richard Crawford."

But just how fervent was my gratitude to Providence it would be hard to say.

"Kate," said Tom, before we were off to our work the next morning, "do you know that you are rather a good-looking girl, but"—looking me over with a critical eye—"yours is the beauty that needs adornment. Here, put this in your purse and buy yourself some swell togs, and you'll be the handsomest woman at Staysails, and, what's more, you will have all the men at your feet."

"Yes, and all the women at my head, pulling my hair. Oh, Tom! Tom!" I cried, with my arms about his neck, "you are the best and most generous, but listen to me, dear. Your money would be wasted. The women whom I shall meet at Fanny Rives' only care for clothes when they are on their own backs, and for a music teacher to approach a millionaire in the smartness of her attire would be put down against her as a crime. If they like me, it will be because they cut a much finer figure than I do. And as for the men, all that they need is appreciation, which costs nothing, poor dears! But you may give me something for tips to the servants. That is all I shall need."

Tom only half acquiesced in my views of the situation, and looked on somewhat disapprovingly the morning of my departure, at the sparse contents of my trunk. As he shut down its lid I said:

"There is one thing I wish I did have, Tom, a tea-gown. I have nothing in that way but that hideous, old, grey atrocity, which you detest so. 'Women at house parties are supposed to chatter in each other's rooms in lovely gowns. I can't chatter in mine with any satisfaction."

But that afternoon, when I unpacked my trunk in my pretty room at Staysails, lo, and behold! what should I come upon but a lovely tea-gown of Liberty silk, heavenly blue, with waves of white lace foaming all over it.

"It looks like that," said Fanny Rives, pointing to the sea outside my window, where the white caps rose and fell upon the blue waves. "What a dear your brother must be. It's very becoming," reverting to the wrapper. "Keep it on for five o'clock tea in the music-room. We dine at eight. You won't see the men till then. The women will be there. Let me see, we have had so much to talk about that I haven't told you who is here. There's Kittie Cruger, and Sallie Neilson, the Lawrence girls, and Belle Wetmore; Constance Cushman, Angelica Bayard, yourself, myself—that makes eleven," running them over on her fingers, "the twelfth is the most extraordinary creature," she said; "she is your next-door neighbour. The other women are all more or less pretty and agreeable, but they are no more like her than a bullet is like a globule of quicksilver. Whilst they are content to sit still, she is here, there, and everywhere. She goes in all directions, each one more charming than the other. She speaks every language, paints, models in clay, is a superb horsewoman, sings divinely. Hush, hear that!" she said, with upraised finger.

It was a woman's voice, singing to herself a melody in a minor key which sounded like a wail from an Irish wake. But I knew it, the air was not Celtic, but Hungarian, an old song of the Tzigane, which Brahms had transcribed for the piano. The voice, sweet and sensuous, fell on my soul with a prescience of evil to come. I looked at the pine trees where there were no birds, and beyond them across the snow to the

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sea, where there were no ships, and I thought of the friend I had lost, and life's emptiness swept over me, just as that beautiful voice swept over the twilight, and filled its dusk with sadness for things lost and remembered.

For a moment a nameless horror made me tremble from head to foot, and then the singer was in the room. I suppose that Fanny presented me to her in due form, but I really don't recollect. I only knew that the Countess Czarmay, a cloud of fluttering pink chiffon, a wealth of lovely fur, golden hair, piled high on the picturesque head, smiles and blue eyes, stood before me, and that both my hands were in hers, with the long, slender fingers, in their turquoise rings, twined about mine, and that, looking into the Madonna-like face, all the ugly tales I had heard about her were forgotten, and I was telling her how glad I was to meet her.

"Come," said Fanny, with a light laugh, "let us go down to the music-room," for I was talking to the Countess of my passion—music—as I had rarely spoken to anyone, "the others are there, and you," turning to me, "will be delighted to play the Countess' accompaniments."

Fanny's music-room was an apartment of so much beauty that I could not keep from commenting upon it. "Ah!" said the Countess, "that is because it is better to love music than to be a musician, for musicians have no sense of the æsthetic. They never feel discords of form, or colour. I sometimes think that all beauty, except that of tone, is wasted upon them."

The only light in the room, which was long and high, fell from tall stands of carved wood, on which were placed branches of silver, whose twisted arms held clusters of wax candles. These stood on either side of the piano. All the rest of the room was shadowy and dim, except when the great logs of wood on the open hearth sent up a flame more ruddy than usual. Then I could see that the faces of the women who reclined on low divans and cushioned chairs, grew soft and tender, as they listened to our music. Between songs I felt like one in a dream. But the Countess busied herself about the tea-table. She was like a child at its first party, making a pretty little comedy over heating the water in the samovar, and putting the tea to steep in its silver urn. That harmonious half hour was the prelude to the days that followed.

I was constantly in the companionship of the Countess.

"I am enthralled by her," as I wrote to Tom. "You ask me if I like her, this enchanting Countess? I can only answer, 'I am fascinated by her.' She leads me round by the nose, as she does all the others. Soon she will have me smoking cigarettes and drinking Sliwitz, a kind of Hungarian brandy distilled from bomb-shells. Her influence is not unlike these two pet indulgences of hers. It stimulates, but does not revivify; so that after I leave her a sort of collapse comes on, where I was buoyant I am depressed. In fact, I go to pieces. But, all the same, I am anxious to get back to her."

I might have added, with truth, that it flattered my vanity that the doctor should have left me to pay court to a being of such incomparable charm as the Countess. But I did not say this, in fact, the doctor's name never passed either my pen, nor my lips, and in the pleasurable ease of my life at Staysails, I was cheating myself into the consolation that he was forgotten.

It was the last day of my visit, but the Countess had been persuaded to stay on a week longer.

She and I were sitting in her room after luncheon, indulging in a "little chat," before her open wood fire.

"Here's a pretty to do," cried Fanny, putting her head in at the door, "Ned" (her husband), "has just had a telegram from an old college friend of his, saying that he will run down to-night on the 9.45 train from town. Ned won't put him off, and I think it's too provoking, when he knows the house is full, and there isn't a place for the man to lay his head."

The Countess took a puff at her cigarette before she spoke. "Let him come, my dear Fanny, it is the unexpected in life that makes it worth living. See!" pointing to a curtained alcove where her maid slept—"there is Ilma's bed. Send her to the servant's quarters, and let Miss Robertson come in here with me, if she will," she said, with a smile to me.

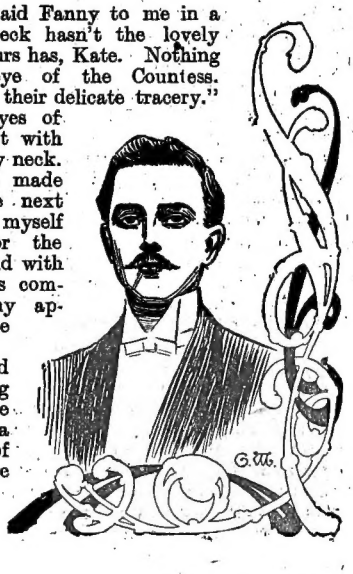
And so matters were settled to Fanny's satisfaction, as well as my own.

A snowstorm had set in that morning, and I gave a commiserating thought to the traveller, who would have to brave the drifts which, by this, were making the roads almost impassable. Fanny had persuaded me to put aside, for our last dinner at Staysails, the high-necked bodice which I usually wore, and, in its stead, to wear a low corsage of jet and lace which she gave me.

"How well you look in it, Kate," she said, when we met just before dinner. "I wish this man whom Ned is precipitating upon me could see you. And that reminds me that I never even asked his name, I was so provoked at Ned."

Here a little stir among Fanny's guests told that the Countess Czarmay was in the room. She was as lovely and fresh as the Spring-time, in a gown of green gossamer, the tint of the earliest buds on the trees. Embroidered on its delicate fabric were garlands of oak leaves and acorns, in glossy shades of brown and green. Bands of Russian sable bordered the low corsage, and set off the creamy tint of her neck and the firm swell of her bust. A court train of green velvet, edged with the fur of the sable, fell in graceful lines from her waist. Her jewels were emeralds. The necklace about her throat was fashioned in the form of a serpent, so flexibly wrought that it moved with every breath its wearer drew. Through the wonderful gold of her glorious hair gleamed the green radiance of still more emeralds, wrought by a cunning artificer, in smaller forms to match the serpent around her throat. The long gloves of Suede that wrinkled over her restless arms, were of a soft wood colour, and at her breast she wore an immense bunch of Parma violets.

"She is a dream," said Fanny to me in a half-tone, "but her neck hasn't the lovely blue veins in it that yours has, Kate. Nothing escapes the artistic eye of the Countess. See how she is admiring their delicate tracery."



True enough, the eyes of the Countess were bent with a peculiar look upon my neck. Something in her gaze made me shudder, but the next moment I called myself morbidly fanciful, for the Countess, in French, and with her sweetest smile, was complimenting me on my appearance, as she led the way in to dinner.

She was the life and soul of that last evening at Staysails. As the storm rose with a mighty crescendo of wind and snow, the recklessness of her mood grew wilder and wilder.

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The songs she sang were all in praise of wine, and love, and death. "Tokay! Tokay!" She flung the words from between her clenched teeth, as she would defy the gale. "Tokay! Tokay!" she screamed in the face of each fresh blast. Her excitement was infectious, and soon she had all the men and women lifting their glasses high in the air, and shouting the refrain. "Tokay! Tokay!" And then, the fever of her spirits rising still higher, she asked me to play her a Hungarian dance—a gipsy dance.

Whilst the others were clearing a circle on the polished floor of the music-room, she was freeing herself, with impatient hands, from her long train of velvet and sable. At the first bar of the music, she tore it from her, as if glad to be free from its restraining dignity, and flung it roughly aside. Her face was no longer that of a Madonna. She had tossed that off, as a woman does a mask at a revel's height. The whirling figure, with the glittering green serpents writhing about her head, was like a gipsy. I doubt if any of the women, I cannot speak for the men—knew what abandon meant before they saw this dance, as danced that night by the Countess Czarmay. Beholding the lawless grace of her supple body, I could well believe one of the tales I had heard of her—that she was gipsy born. No one but a gipsy could have danced as she did. So fleet were the circles of her flying feet that her skirts curled about her in spiral lines of green. She seemed like a flame licked into life from unholy fires, and had she suddenly darted up the chimney, to disappear into the forces of the storm, which was now at its height, it would have seemed only a fitting fulfilment of Nature's law of restoration.

But nothing of this sort happened. Panting and quivering, with white face and dishevelled hair, the dancer finally flung herself down among the cushions of the divan. Here the men gathered about her, but the women stood aloof in shocked little groups, whispering among themselves.

It was now close upon midnight. The storm had somewhat subsided. Fanny went to the window, and drawing its curtains aside, we saw how white the world was with snow.

"I am looking to see," she said, "if there is a sign of Ned's man. He sent the brougham over to meet the 9.45 train, but I doubt if it gets back to-night. The storm is frightful."

Nobody seemed to care very much whether it did or not, and after a few commonplaces the party broke up, the women going to their rooms, and the men following their host to the smoking-room, to await, over their pipes and toddy, the arrival of his friend.

The Countess and I were at last alone. It became manifest to me that an unusual silence possessed her. But I put this down to a reaction from the gaiety of the evening. As I made my preparations for the night, I could see, from my little room in the alcove, that she had got herself into a loose gown of scarlet silk, in which she sat, with her back turned to me, before the fire.

Her head was bent forward, and her hair fell on either side of her face in great sweeps of gold. She was intent upon something which she held upon her knees. So absorbed was she in this object, whatever it may have been, that she sat like one turned to stone. The rigidity of her attitude made me apprehensive of—I knew not what.

I turned to go to her, but just then, I saw that the long right arm of the Countess was moving back and forth with the mechanical regularity with which one sets out to accomplish some well-defined task. She had once told me that she was an expert maker of lace.

I tried to reassure myself that this was what she was now doing, or, perhaps, polishing the long, shell-like nails of her beautiful hands. But in the motion of that arm, in its hanging red sleeve, there was nothing feminine. The storm had sunk into a stillness as profound as that of the Countess. I am not naturally nervous, but I now felt myself possessed by an unaccountable feeling of terror.

It was with a sensation of security that I heard, far in the distance, the air stirred by the sound of carriage-wheels. I was glad to know that the next room would not be empty, and that its occupant would soon be within reach of my voice. The carriage was slowly approaching the house, but the Countess, still crouching over her task, paid no attention to it. Unable to longer sustain the suspense of a situation which was fast throwing me into a panic, I suddenly cried out:

"What are you doing there, dear Countess Lara?"

"Come here," she said, without turning her head. "Come here, and see for yourself what I am doing."

In my nightdress, and with bare feet, I lightly crossed the room to where she sat. Bending over her, I saw that in her left hand she held a slab of some hard, greyish substance, and in her right hand, the hand which never stayed its motion, she held a long, thin knife. There was something so unlooked for, and, at the same time, so sinister, in the aspect of that blade with the cruel edge, in the delicate, muscular hand, moving backwards and forwards, with diabolical monotony, that, involuntarily, I exclaimed:

"Good Heavens! What are you going to do with that horrible thing?"

"I am going to cut your throat from ear to ear."

The voice in which these words were spoken, more than the words themselves, froze my blood with horror, for it was the voice of the insane. I am gifted with what musicians call the acute ear, and voices to me are character. The voice of the Countess Czarmay, as I now heard it, conveyed to me the intelligence that she was a maniac. The words were nothing. Had she merely wished me a pleasant evening I would have known that the voice which enunciated the words was that of a being from whom reason had fled. I made no reply, trying to think what I could do to save myself. She had locked the door, I remembered, after we had entered the room, and a hurried glance showed me that the key was not in the keyhole.

Meanwhile the carriage had come to a standstill. The men were out on the front steps, giving the belated traveller welcome.

My frenzied thought was to rush to the window beneath which they were laughing and talking, and to cry out to them for help. But to do this would be folly, for before they could have reached me, the knife would have done its work. I realised that my only hope lay in being able to outwit the Countess, and to temporise with her until I could find means to escape. At all events, until the man should be established in the next room. Not that I knew how he could save me, but, somehow, I felt that in him lay the one chance of saving my life.

But he must come swiftly, for I saw certain signs of restlessness that told me the Countess was growing impatient.

Good Heavens! What if he should join the men in the smoking-room? A cold sweat broke out over me. Ten minutes there might be fatal. I could hear the voices growing fainter as the door closed on the men. Fortunately, the Countess was so completely dominated by her mad desire, that none of these sounds had made themselves audible to her. There was but one object in the world of which she was cognisant, the object on which her eyes were fixed with a raving glare, the little blue spot on my neck, where the vein lay under the flesh. With her eyes still fastened there, I saw that she was trying to speak, but she was so rocked by a horrible transport that the words came from her in clotted incoherence.

"Temptress, temptress!" she hissed out. "It's your fault that I am going to do this. I like you, I don't want to kill you, but I have to do it. I never thought of it until I saw that—that—that," she said, pointing with the knife at my neck. "It arouses a craving which nothing can satisfy but blood. I cannot resist it. Once before," and her voice died down to a whisper, "I was tempted in Buda Pesth. She was a pretty creature, and the blood in her veins was young, and when it streamed on my hands," and she softly rubbed her palms together in diabolical reminiscence, "it made me warm, too. Oh, so warm!" and a low laugh gurgled in her throat and was drowned there, with a torrent of words which came from her like a hemorrhage. "They tried to lock me up. They watched me for days—days—days! But I fooled them all. Doctors! Bah! I had money to buy them, and beauty to beguile them. They called me mad, but there was

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more reason in my madness than in their sanity. Besides, I am not mad. By nature I am gentle, tender, loving, until I see that—that, and the craving comes to make me cruel. When I sung and danced this evening I was a demon and it was you who made me so. You made me so with that. Do you hear, with that?"

I did hear the sickening words, but notwithstanding the terror they inspired, I moved nearer to the Countess, for lying, not two steps from me, I saw, half hidden in the long, white fur rug, where she must have dropped it in her preoccupation, the key to the door. I slid my bare foot along very stealthily until it was in such a position as made it easy for me to slip my toe through the handle of the key. If fitted like a ring to a finger, and the folds of my long nightdress fell about it and hid it from view.

My courage rose from the contact of the metal on my instep. Besides, I heard the door of the smoking-room open, and the voices of the men in the hall, bidding good-night to the man who was to be in the next room, and I knew that in a few more moments he would be there. But, until he should get there, it behoved me to successfully divert the Countess. However, before I could speak, she had bounded from her chair, to throw herself roughly in front of me and to hold the knife up to my throat. Had I flinched, that moment would have been my last. By a superhuman effort of my will, I kept under control the overcharged battery of my nerves, and managed, for the first time, to catch and to hold the shifting eyes of the Countess.

"You are too calm—too calm!" she muttered. "Are you trying to fool me? Do you know what I am going to do?"

My words had to pass over the steel of that awful knife when they left my throat, but I kept the tremors from my voice, and my eyes looked straight into the eyes that were trying to get away from mine.

"Yes, I know what you are going to do, dear Countess, but I am not ready yet to die. Let me have a few moments in which to prepare to meet my Maker."

With bursting eardrums I could hear the man's footsteps mounting the long flight of stairs. The conviction that he was coming, this stranger, not alone augmented my courage, but filled me with a mysterious sense of security. As the steps came nearer and nearer my brain grew clearer. I took a rapid reconnoitre of the room. In a flash my course was decided upon. The walls were high, fully sixteen feet, and near the ceiling a transom window was cut, and standing directly under it was an old-fashioned piece of furniture. Its four bowed legs supported drawers which rose, tier upon tier, till they were ten all told, each drawer having at either end a hanging handle of brass. As if to favour my plan, standing in close proximity to this was a *prie dieu*, of carved ebony and purple velvet.

"Do you want to pray?" she spat out the word as if it were venom.

"Yes," I answered, "I want to pray," pointing as I spoke to the *prie dieu*, which stood, luckily, behind the tall back of her chair. Slowly, and as if loth to leave my flesh, the knife was withdrawn from my throat. I must gain time, for the steps halted on the top of the stairs. The man was talking in muffled tones to his host. "Are you sure your knife is quite sharp enough, dear Countess? I am a coward, I confess, and I want it over quickly. Look, does it not seem a little blunt? There, near the point. And while I am praying, why will you not take the time to make it sharper?"

To this she agreed, saying: "I will give you five minutes, but if you raise your voice, if you whisper even, if, in any way, you try to call out for help, I shall not wait for you to finish your prayers. Do you promise me?"

"As I hope to save my soul, I promise you. Not a word shall pass my lips."

Just then the little clock on the mantel struck one. "Go! I will leave you to yourself on the conditions I have named. When the time is up I shall come to you." She watched me as a cat does a mouse, as I sank upon my knees upon the *prie dieu*. My clasped hands, and my eyes raised to Heaven fooled her, as I meant they should. Fooled her so completely that she once more resumed her seat in the great arm-chair, to become absorbed, as I knew she would, in the work of sharpening her knife. I shall for ever believe that the God whose religion she compelled me to travesty that night, heard the prayer I had no time to offer. For, as if to help me in my extremity, a great wind arose and struck the house with a mighty roar which set all the shutters banging and the windows rattling. And in the din, the mad woman, making ready her knife, did not hear, as I did, the door of the next room open and shut. Nor did she hear me when I sprang from my knees to the head rest of the *prie dieu*. From there to scale the rungs of a ladder which I made by pulling out such of the drawers as I needed for ledges on which to set my feet. With the key between my teeth, I climbed till my hands grasped the fluted woodwork about the front of the piece of furniture. Stealthily I drew myself up over this, to crawl along its dusty top, till I could get a good look through the transom.

When I did so, my promise to the Countess came near to being broken, for my voice well-nigh rang out in the gladness that possessed me, for the man in the next room was Dr. Dick Crawford! Then it was, to the shame of my human woman heart, that this joy receded, leaving in its place a jealousy so fierce and so desolating that it might well have been a question which was the more insane, the Countess or I. He was there, not because of me, but because of the woman for whose madness I would, in all probability, have to die. In the face of that death which was pressing close upon me, the strongest of all human passions had come to rack me, and to usurp all wiser and gentler thoughts.

This aberration was of such duration as is a flash of lightning, gone by the time my eyes, anguished and wild with terror, drew his eyes to mine, looking down upon him from my transomed height. In that one look I saw—but this is not a love story, never mind what I saw. Let it suffice that it made life a thousand times more precious to me than it had ever seemed before. And, if death must be, remembering that look, I could die almost content.

There was no time to lose. I dropped the key from my hand to his. Once more his eyes rested on mine, and then he was gone. The thought that perhaps I should never see him again smote me with despair. If he came in time to save me it must be quickly, for I saw that the mad creature, with the knife in her hand, had risen from her chair and was moving towards the *prie dieu*. For reasons best known to herself she had not turned up the gas in the room, and the fire had burnt low by this, leaving us in semi-darkness. But the figure gliding towards me in the long, red robe seemed, in my distempered fancy,

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by her passing through it to turn the air red. When she reached the place of prayer and found me gone she burst into oaths and cries horrible to hear.

Crouching down, flat on my face behind the woodwork which only half concealed me, I could feel the piece of furniture rock and tremble beneath the blows she struck it with the knife. She jabbed down deep into its wood, ripping and tearing it in her frenzy. A wild shriek of laughter told me that she had caught sight of me. I heard the brass handles rattling as she clutched them in her maddened hands. She was climbing up after me.

Her breath came in quick gasps, I could hear it. Suddenly she shot a long arm over the railing, and twisted her fingers in my hair until she tore it from my head. But I kept my face pressed close down to the woodwork, knowing it was the little blue spot in my neck she was trying to get at. My strength was no match for hers. With a sudden wrench of the hair, which was bleeding at the roots, she jerked my head back, leaving my throat exposed to the knife which hovered above it.

And then I thought the end had come. But before the blade could descend from where she held it high in air, her arms were seized and pinioned in a grip as strong as that death from which he had saved me. And the Countess Czarmay, snapping, snarling, foaming at the mouth, was powerless in the grasp of Dr. Crawford.

I saw the knife drop from her hand. I saw the others, brought by her shrieks, rushing in at the door. And then, I let myself think of the one being on earth whom I had kept all through that terrible hour from my thoughts, knowing that to think of him would unnerve me—my brother Tom. And thinking of Tom, I burst into a tempest of tears, which ended in a dead faint. How they got me down I never knew. When I opened my eyes it was on the lounge, in Fanny's room, it was now an hour later, and she was with me.

"Only think, dear, I never dreamt that Ned's man was the distinguished Dr. Crawford, the eminent authority on diseases of the brain. It seems that he had imposed secrecy upon Ned, because he wished to come down here *incog.*, so that he might study from personal observation the case of the Countess. All his previous diagnoses had been made simply from watching her at a distance. He has noted every gesture, every expression, every movement; no detail has been too trifling to escape his notice.

"And, do you know, Kate, that the very first time he set eyes on her at the Tournament, he knew that she was possessed by the homicidal mania? Just think what a great diagnostician he must be! Her case has baffled all the specialists of Europe, and such a dance as she has led her poor husband, Count Fedor Czarmay, who, by the way, is an old Heidelberg friend of Dr. Crawford's. And it was only out of sympathy with him that he has devoted himself so untiringly to her case. Poor Countess! How sad it is. So long as she lives, she will have to be caged, like a wild beast! And, only to think, that this is the very first time that Dr. Crawford has met her! How fortunate it was for you, dear, that he came just when he did!" she said, with a smile, for at that moment Dr. Crawford entered the room.

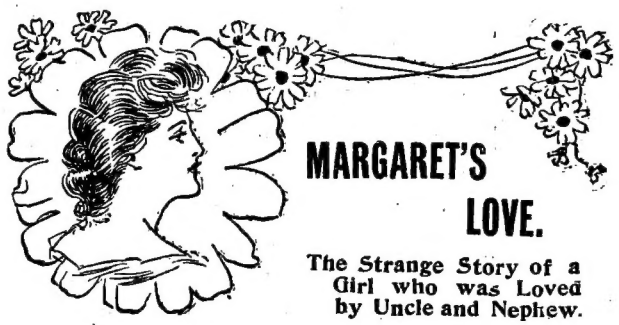
"You were saying something, Mrs. Rives, which I did not quite catch; may I trouble you to repeat it?" he said, coming over to where I lay, and standing quite close to me.

"I was telling Miss Robertson how fortunate it was for her that you came just when you did. It certainly was a night of events in the household of the Colgate-Rives."

Before he answered her, Dr. Crawford stooped down and kissed me on my lips. "More fortunate for me, Mrs. Rives," he said, "than for her."

Harley Gwynn.

"You'll be sorry some day that you didn't get married, if you don't." "Well, I'd rather not be married and be sorry I wasn't, than be married and sorry I was."



MARGARET'S LOVE.

The Strange Story of a Girl who was Loved by Uncle and Nephew.

It was a strange story, though a simple one; but then most of the stories of real life are strange. Margaret Griffiths had loved her husband; that was the one thing in the whole world of which she was sure. When she read stories and poems about love, as she did read them often—for she was a young creature, even in her widowhood—she always felt a little sympathetic thrill at her heart, and said to herself:

"That is how *I* loved my husband."

Yet the fact that she had loved him at all was a puzzle to the Ryefield people, who speculated about the matter, as country neighbours will. When they were married, Llewelyn Griffiths, as everybody called him, was already forty years old, and Margaret was only seventeen. Her father had left her to "the trusty guardianship of his good friend, Llewelyn Griffiths," as he said in his will.

Mr. Griffiths settled the estate, looked into the girl's affairs a little, as in duty bound, and then rather suddenly asked her to marry him. She had grown up, admiring her guardian. He was tall, handsome, full of strength and power—just the man for a romantic girl to make a hero of; and Margaret Fay was romantic to her very finger-tips. Moreover, she had been brought up by her father since her mother's death, when she was too young to remember; and naturally she shared all his likes and dislikes, and the strongest feeling he had in the world, next to his love for his daughter, was his attachment to his lifelong friend, Llewelyn Griffiths.

Llewelyn had certainly not wooed his bride in any story-book fashion; but then she had felt that she could not expect that—he was so much older and wiser and better than she in every way. He had talked to her very gently about her loneliness, and then he had said that *he* was lonely too; and if such a thing were possible as that she could make up her mind to come home with him and be his child-wife, and live with him always, he would be very, very good to her. And then he added, with something that would have been shyness had he not been such a self-possessed man:

"You know, Margaret, that I am only two years younger than your father."

"As if that mattered!" she cried, with her brown eyes shining and her cheeks glowing softly. "As if that mattered! You are *you!*"

"That means that you will come to me?" he said, and then he took the little fluttering hands she held out to him into his own, and gave her a kiss so like the one which her father used to give her at night and morning, that it brought the quick tears of memory into her gentle eyes. And so Margaret believed that she was in love, and that this tall, handsome man, who had been her admiration ever since she could remember, was her heart's lord, her knight, her hero, and a dozen other high-sounding titles, which she had taken out of the story-books.

Her lover had said nothing to her about money, and she did not know whether she had much or little. She supposed it must be a good deal, however, since in her father's time they had always lived freely, and none of her wishes had ever been denied her.

They were married on a lovely morning in early June; and it was past midsummer when they came home from their

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wedding tour. It was just at twilight when they arrived; and I think there is no hour so full of mystic solemnity as a midsummer twilight in the country. Pretty Margaret felt the strange spell of it as she stepped into the shadow of the elm drive, as the broad path was called which led up to her future home. Her very heart stood still. It seemed to her that her destiny had taken ghostly shape, and stood in front of her; and involuntarily she moved to one side, that she might not brush the phantom with her garments.

"This is home, little wife," said the kind, cheery voice of her husband; and the spell was broken. She went on then cheerfully enough into the stately old house, where one Llewelyn Griffiths after another had lived and ruled for generations.

They lived there for one peaceful year—a very happy year to Margaret, though so quiet. She went on dreaming her own dreams, investing her rather silent, yet always tender lord, with all the qualities of the heroes of her books, and honestly believing herself to be the very happiest little wife that the sun shone on. She half wondered sometimes that her happiness was so quiet; there were always tumults of one sort and another in the story-books, but that must be because the course of her true love had run so smoothly, and Llewelyn had none of the faults of temper which the other heroes had.

It was midsummer again when the horse upon which her husband had ridden away came home riderless; and Llewelyn Griffiths was brought in afterwards, by some neighbours, who had found him lying placidly upon the grass, with no sign of injury about him, but a smile upon his face so full of light and joy that at first they thought he must be alive, and then were frightened, as if such a smile on the face of the dead were unseemly.

The doctor came—the old village doctor, whose patients were to him almost like his children; and then it came out that both he and Llewelyn Griffiths himself had known for some years that just this end was sure to come.

The family lawyer came, too—but that was after the funeral—and made Margaret understand that she was a rich young widow, since all her husband's estates were hers, unreservedly; and then she found out for the first time that her father had left no fortune at all behind him—absolutely not enough money to pay his debts.

"What should I have done?" thought the poor little widow, "but for Llewelyn?"

She was scarcely more than eighteen then; and she shivered as if she had felt a cold blast when she asked herself the question—for she had never known a want or a care in her life, and the thought of struggling with the world for her daily bread came to her with a sort of horror. If anything could have made her hero's memory more dear, it was the knowledge that his love had saved her for ever from such a fate.

Her grief for him was not at all passionate, but it was very deep. She felt an intolerable aching want of him in her heart; or was it really the want, not so much of *him*, as of the love, and tenderness to which he had accustomed her? Sometimes she felt like a little child whom its mother had left in a great desert. The child would stretch out imploring arms for its mother to come back; but those arms would welcome any kindly comer who would take it out of the awful loneliness.

If a thought like that ever crossed Margaret's mind, she rejected it with hot indignation at herself. She always would mourn for Llewelyn—always—always; Llewelyn who had married her when she was utterly poor, utterly alone, and had made her life henceforth like that of a sheltered flower in a perpetual summer. She would be Llewelyn's, and Llewelyn's only, till she died; and then Heaven would *be* Heaven partly because she would so certainly find Llewelyn there waiting for her.

One day, when her husband had been dead six months, she beguiled the dreariness of a winter afternoon by looking through the contents of an old desk that had been his. She found some things that surprised her—one drawer in which was such a book as she did not know that Llewelyn cared about, an actual novel; and there were passages marked in this book, sometimes heavily, sometimes lightly, as if two people had read it together. And there was a deep, vivid, red rose of long ago, which crumbled when she touched it; and its ghost seemed to come out and fill the room with a passionate, despairing fragrance.

She wondered a little over this rose and this book, which had a drawer all to themselves; but she did not think much about them, because in another drawer she found a letter, and this, too, had a drawer to itself. On the outside of it was written:

"*For my child-wife to read on the day when she is twenty-one, if before that time I am dead, as I think will be the case.*"

Margaret took up the letter, and a strange thrill shook her, and she grew a little cold. It was as if her husband had put forth his hand out of his grave, and touched her. She was so very lonely, that she longed to read this message from him, and she questioned awhile with herself whether she might not do so. But she had an almost superstitious dread of disobeying him in anything; and she shut the drawer hurriedly lest she

Llyn was always over bold—he bent down his head and kissed her.

should be tempted, and went away and sat down in the firelight.

She began to think how very young she was—only eighteen and a half now, and it would be two years and a half more before she could even read that letter. Oh, how many, many weary years, if she lived as long as most people do, before she could go to Llewelyn! She *must* read his words after all; but, no—ten thousand times no! she would do his will now that he was gone even more sacredly than if he were alive.

She got up and went back to the desk. She took one look at the drawer where lay the crumbled red-rose petals, with their dying, despairing scent; and then she looked at the letter—the very last words her husband could speak to her until she, too, was dead. Then resolutely she locked the desk, as one who would hold no further parley with temptation; and, bringing the key away with her, threw it into the very heart of the glowing fire.

When Llewelyn Griffiths had been dead two years, one of his nephews came home from the medical studies he had been completing in French and German hospitals. It was Llewelyn's money that had sent him abroad; but Margaret

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did not know that until afterwards; and Llewelyn had arranged for him, when his foreign studies were completed, to come home to Ryefield and begin his medical career as partner of the old doctor who had killed and cured so many generations of the Ryefield people, that it seemed almost time he should enter into his rest.

The young fellow was another Llewelyn Griffiths, though everyone called him Llyn; and it had been the uncle's dream that this younger Llewelyn Griffiths should live after him in the old place, and keep up the old name there. That dream came to its end, however, when he himself married Margaret, and bequeathed to her all his possessions, as I have said, leaving her absolutely unfettered as to their future disposition.

Naturally, when the young doctor came to Ryefield, he went to see his uncle's widow. She was twenty years old then, and a daintier, sweeter little lady had never been mistress of the stately old house, in all the generations of Griffithses, who had lived and died there.

Dr. Llyn found it impossible to regard her as his uncle's widow, though she still wore her unmitigated widow's mourning.

He looked into her soft, brown eyes, and watched the blush-roses come and go in her fair young face, and he fell, at once and altogether, in love at first sight. He hardly realised just what his own symptoms meant; but he presently "diagnosed" the case, as he said, and he knew it was a mortal wound which his heart had received.

He tried to be very discreet, and not to shock his "rare, pale Margaret" by any too hasty demonstrations; but he actually haunted her in spite of himself. And she rather liked it, and began to think it was very nice to be an aunt by marriage to somebody.

He thought that, in waiting from midsummer until the middle of winter before he asked her to marry him, he had shown himself a model of discretion. He was not prepared for the look of shocked surprise that dilated those soft eyes of hers, when suddenly, one winter evening, he told her that he loved her, and asked her to be his wife. She just looked into his face, with sudden amazement in her own, and said, with an air she tried to make very dignified indeed:

"It seems to me you forget yourself strangely. I have some regard for your uncle's memory, if you have none. I shall be Mrs. Llewelyn Griffiths until I die."

"That is just what I have been hoping," cried wicked Llyn; and then, suddenly, his meaning, and the quiet humour of his cool answer, touched that chord in her that quivers between smiles and tears in all women, and she burst into a laugh that made her, a moment after, hate herself and him.

"I am not laughing because I am pleased," she cried hotly, almost beginning to weep.

"No, I understand," said imperturbable Llyn; "you are laughing because you are displeased."

"Yes, I *am* displeased, and shocked, and grieved; and I thought you were a real friend and a relative, and now I know——"

"That I love you," put in Llyn, "as *I know* nobody ever did before, and I don't believe anyone ever will again; and I want you for my wife, to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, until death us do part."

"We will not wait for death to part us," she said, with a quiet strength that astonished Llyn more than any of her charms had ever done; and she rose and walked steadily out of the room, her long black robes trailing behind her.

Llyn stood still for a while in front of the fire. I believe he whistled. Perhaps he thought she would come back again; but, if so, he reckoned without his hostess. She waited quietly in her own room until she heard the front door shut. Then she knelt down, and leant her head against her husband's desk. She longed desperately to open it and read her letter. She thought that to read that letter would be as if her dead love should take her into his arms, and thank and bless her for being true to him when she had been tempted—yes, she owned to herself that she *had* been tempted just a little. But she had thrown away the key; and, after all, there were only six months to wait, and she must do Llewelyn's will.

The next morning she sent Dr. Llyn a very dignified little letter. It said:

"Dear Llyn,—*You will please not come here again until you are ready to forget what you said last night, and to respect your uncle's memory as you should.—Your well-wishing aunt,*

"Margaret Griffiths."

His well-wishing aunt! This time Llyn whistled; there was no mistake about it. He put the little letter in his pocket as if it had been a love-token, and went off to make a round of medical visits.

Really it was very lonely for Mistress Margaret all the rest of that winter. But she never had more than a moment's temptation to recall Dr. Llyn.

And somehow the Winter wore away, and Spring went by; and then Summer burst upon the world, all bloom, and pomp, and radiance. And with the June came Margaret's twenty-first birthday.

She dressed swiftly, and then she sent for a locksmith, and in five minutes more Llewelyn's letter was in her hand.

She barred the door of her room. She sat down, and broke the seal, and then she put her hand over her eyes, and said a silent little prayer before she began so read. This was the letter:

"My Little Margaret,—*Other husbands have put out a grasp, from the very grave, to draw yet closer the chain by which they held a beloved woman in bondage; I stretch forth mine to set my child-wife wholly free. You have never loved me, my Margaret, with your uttermost love; and perhaps you yourself will have found that out before this letter reaches you. Nor have I ever loved you as those lovers love of whom your girl's heart has dreamt. I did love once, with all the passionate young heart of me; and she whom I loved died.*

"*I never meant to marry anyone else; but when your father—my best friend—left you in my charge, I knew no other way to care for you so well as to bring you home, my wife. I should not have dared to take this responsibility; but I knew well, as Dr. Leland could tell you, that my life must needs be brief—a matter of months, perhaps—of two or three years at the very most—and so I ventured to take you, and care for you tenderly, knowing that before your girl's heart was ready for the deep love of womanhood, I should have set you free.*

"*When you read this, you will be twenty-one, young, beautiful, prosperous, with all the world before you where to choose. You have a nature unusually capable of happiness, and I predict for you very great happiness some day. When that day comes, be sure, my little Margaret, that if the happy dead can know the joys and sorrows of those they leave behind them here, we shall look down from our far place, and bless you—she and I.*

"Llewelyn Griffiths."

Do you think Margaret's first thought a strange one. It broke from her lips in a happy little cry:

"Thank Heaven, he never really—*really* loved me!"

I suppose *she* knew why she thanked Heaven for that.

That afternoon she dressed herself in a soft, simple, white gown, that made her look more lovely and more girlish than ever. Her eyes were bright with some new, dear brightness, and the fitful blush-roses came and went in her cheeks more fitfully than ever. It was no wonder that the maid who answered her summons when she rang the bell, looked at her in surprise when she said:

"I wish you would fetch the doctor. I don't mean the old doctor; bring Dr. Llyn. Say I don't feel very well."

"What is it, dear aunt?" said Llyn, half-an-hour later, pretending to look at her anxiously. "Is it your head?"

"No, Llyn, I think it's my heart. It's—it's this letter."

And, as she spoke, she put his uncle's letter into his hand.

And Llyn read, and then he smiled; and then—for Llyn was always over-bold—he bent down his head, and kissed her.

"Yes," he said quietly, "I see how it is. You will be Mrs. Llewelyn Griffiths until you die.

Marion Montague.

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SPLENDID NEW SERIAL YOU CAN START TO-DAY.

Dupes of Destiny

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

By Blanche Eardley, Writer of "The Bond Between."

PROLOGUE.

A YOUTH is in the private room of Messrs. Samuel Sharpe and Quirke, solicitors, awaiting the head of the firm's announcement as to whether he is the heir to the baronetcy of the late Sir Basil Wingate or not.

Mr. Sharpe says:

"You will remember, Mr. Rust, at the reading of the will, the title, which by special remainder he had power to dispose of, and the money were left by Sir Basil Wingate to the elder son of his run-away only daughter, Helen Jerningham, *should* she have one; and failing a son being born to her, the title and the money *with* the estate, should go to you, his nephew; afterwards to *your* son—should you marry, or to the *son* of your daughter; no child of the feminine sex directly inheriting it."

He then tells Cyprian Rust that, hearing Helen Jerningham went to Australia, he has extensively advertised for her in Australian papers, but with no effect. Therefore he congratulates his listener on becoming Sir Cyprian Rust.

The solicitor is called out of the room, and Cyprian Rust sees on the table an unopened letter with an Australian stamp. The address he recognises as being in the handwriting of his cousin Helen Jerningham!

Is it written to announce the birth of a son and heir? If so it would rob him of the legacy at the eleventh hour!

A step sounds outside the door. Quickly Cyprian Rust thrusts the letter into his pocket. He hurriedly says good-bye to Mr. Sharpe, and when he reaches his hotel he reads the missive. It tells how Helen Jerningham has left Australia, so that the future heir—if a boy—may be born in England!

Sir Cyprian Rust carefully burns the letter that might have dealt the death blow to his ambitions, and mentally resolves to go to any extremes to retain the title.

Meanwhile Helen Jerningham is dying on board an ocean liner in giving birth to twin sons.

From incoherent remarks that she makes, the physician who attends her is led to believe that a secret is attached to the boys' history. But she dies ere she reveals her name or the boys' identity!

Many years later.

MARCELLA RUST, daughter of Sir Cyprian, finds a spade guinea which a mysterious man has hidden underneath the mat outside a certain room which she has been forbidden to enter in their home, Wingate Court, Crawley. Her curiosity is naturally aroused, and she tells her father of the occurrence. He seems annoyed at her alertness.

Sir Cyprian learns, through the Rev. Philip Nullius, that a dying woman wishes to see him.

He goes to see her, and she shows him a later will of Sir Basil Wingate, by which all his property is left to the descendant of Helen Jerningham unconditionally. Sir Cyprian snatches this will from her, and she dies before she can inform anyone else.

Sir Cyprian visits Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox, where he meets Mr. Caleb J. Johnson, millionaire and city magnate, who is in love with the hostess.

The baronet, speaking in private to Lady Violet, and referring to Johnson, says:

"The house of that millionaire chap contains a valuable lot of plate, and you have the *entrée* to it. When next you visit it there are certain details I wish you to note, and——"

"Not *that* house!" she gasps. "I cannot, even to you! He will be here to-night, as my guest."

He looked at her curiously. "You either do this for me, or Marcella will know that for a certain sum her—aunt—sold her!"

For one brief moment the woman hesitated, then her answer came, slowly:

"I will do it; for my task-master is a hard one!"

Late in the evening Johnson proposes to Lady Violet. Knowing her position, she, of course, refuses him.

"Why," replies he, "is there any just cause or impediment?"

As he speaks the palms in front of the window part and a man lurches heavily into the room.

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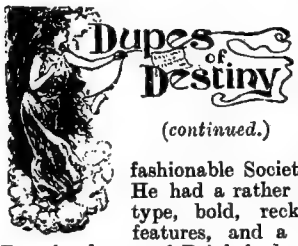

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SIXTH CHAPTER.

An Unbidden Guest.

He was not an ordinary ruffian the man who had so unceremoniously interrupted a prospective engagement between the fashionable Society beauty and a millionaire. He had a rather handsome face of a dissolute type, bold, reckless, blue eyes, well-shaped features, and a dare-devil, sneering mouth. But the demon of Drink had marked him down as its own, and in bloodshot eyes, discoloured skin, and loose lips of a bluish tint there waved the black flag of the fatal vice

His coat was shabby, and his linen not of that hue usually connected with the attire of a gentleman; but he wore his clothes with a certain careless swagger that only a man who has originally been within the magic circle of the "smart set" ever retains through the many vicissitudes that his degradation takes him.

He gazed with an amused smile upon the silent woman in her beauty, who, grasping her fan with one white hand, rested the other on a marble statue of the goddess Pallas Athene.

The financier, Caleb J. Johnson, was the first to break the strange stillness.

"Look here, my fine buccaneer," he said in his curiously-crisp tone, "this kind of entrance into a lady's drawing-room may look very well from the front of a theatre, when you expect a little applause for it, but just now it has fallen sort of flat. Only the presence of this lady prevents me from introducing my foot to you in a way not always agreeable but sometimes effective. And if you retain any sense in your head you will just put those words in your pipe and smoke 'em. D'you hear?" he went on in a slightly-louder key. "You had better get out of this, or I'll call for the police!"

The intruder smiled slowly, his eyes glinting narrowly as he gazed from the face of the speaker back to that of the woman, whose dark eyes seemed to burn like living coals of fire as they met his.

He took a cigarette from his pocket, and poised it jauntily in his mouth.

"Thanks, awfully, for the advice," he said carelessly. "As to going out of the house, much as I dislike appearing disagreeable in interrupting an amorous *tête-à-tête*, I am afraid I must regretfully decline to leave you to make your proposal again to Lady Violet."

The millionaire flushed darkly, and took a step forward.

"You drunken hound," he said thickly, "you will pay for this insolence dearly!" Then, turning to the white-faced woman at his side, he said: "Forgive me, Lady Violet, but I think it will be better for you to leave the room while I deal with this fellow as he deserves."

A slow smile parted the lips of the stranger as he looked leisurely at the silent woman whose eyes had never left his face.

"I think it will be wiser if you restrain your—friend's martial spirit, Vi. I don't wish to be disagreeable, but if I am forced to assert myself I may surprise him."

As one roused from a dream, she woke to life at his words. With a light touch on the millionaire's arm, she said, with an effort:

"Don't touch him. He is not what you imagine; he has a right to be here."

"A right!" muttered Caleb J. Johnson sarcastically. "Yes, as much as a lackey or a 'boots'! Let me kick him out, Lady Violet; even old servants have not the monopoly to be insolent."

Her face flushed warmly, and she flashed a warning glance at the debonair intruder, who still regarded them with a cynical smile.

"One moment; I want to speak with you alone." She murmured. Then, drawing him aside, she said slowly:

"Mr. Johnson, as a man of the world, you know that there is a skeleton in every family. That man is the skeleton of mine. He is a disgraceful member of it—a creature we would be glad to hear the last of; but, still, when he appears in our midst we are forced to acknowledge him."

She spoke bitterly; but the eyes of the financier were scanning her face keenly, and he noted the ebb and flow of colour on her pale cheeks.

"Who is the fellow?" he said abruptly. "Anyway, relationship is no reason why he should behave like a low-down bounder."

"No," she answered bitterly; "but it is sometimes an excuse." Then she went on rapidly: "I want you to leave me now, Mr. Johnson. If I don't return to him he will only make a scene among my other guests, whom I do not regard in the same light as I do you."

"But I thought Sir Cyprian Rust was your brother-in-law?" said the financier slowly.

"That is no reason why I should make him the recipient of my confidences, Mr. Johnson," Lady Violet answered briefly. "My brother-in-law and myself are quite friends; but there we stop. I do not put my trust in princes."

"No," he replied with an arrogant touch; "but you will in financiers—won't you? Remember, when you have done with that oaf of a hanger-on I shall return for my answer. You nearly gave it me, and I am almost certain what it will be."

She flung a nervous glance behind her, where, standing with his elbow against the statue of the Pallas Athene, was the shabby man who had interrupted their *tête-à-tête*, waiting with imperturbable patience for her to join him.

"Not to-night" she said hastily, "another time. I—I am not in a mood to be acquiescent, Mr. Johnson. Perhaps I may say what you will not like, through sheer *ennui*."

"You can never say what I will not like, Lady Violet" he retorted gallantly, "least of all to-night, when your answer will, I am certain, be the one I intend to have, notwithstanding all the undesirable relatives in the world. I have fought and won hard battles in my life, and will not admit of defeat in the most important of all my undertakings."

A sense of being in the grip of a stronger will than her own made Lady Violet wish for a moment that she had not asked the "Gold King" to dine with her that night. His voice was so quiet, his glance so serene, that she feared to come in contact with the iron hand beneath the velvet glove lest she should be bent to his might, even as she was to that of her brother-in-law, Sir Cyprian Rust.

"As you are strong, be merciful!" she smiled faintly. "At present I cannot even consider the question you made to me, let alone decide upon my answer. Now go, please, and let me hear the unfortunate creature who stepped so inopportunely into our conversation."

"I will do your bidding now," said Caleb J. Johnson suavely; "and shall wait near, in case that ruffian grows unpleasant. But before I leave your house, Lady Violet, it will be with the right to protect you from further insult at the hands of ne'er-do-well cousins."

As his enormous figure strolled towards the conservatory she sent a glance of wonder after him. He was so assured of her answer that she felt it would be useless to go contrary to his wishes. If it were not for that—— She bit her lip, and turned back into the drawing-room. She knew she had some moments to herself, as her guests were nearly all visitors in the house and accustomed to being left to their own devices, while Marcella was in the conservatory with Edward Day.

"Well?" she said, in a low, even tone, addressing the languid figure of the man who had prevented her from sending the announcement of her engagement to the *Morning Post*. "As it is more than eight years since you honoured me with any correspondence or requests for money I naturally deduced that you were dead, since all your allowances during that time were returned to my solicitors."

He stretched himself lazily, and chewed the end of his cigarette.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Vi, old girl, especially as you

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seemed to be on the verge of forming new ties with that man of opulence and bulk. I suppose you would call me the 'little rift within the lute' of your expectation, eh?" and he laughed softly.

She looked at him with quiet contempt.

"It is not my desire to discuss my friends with you. They believe me to be a widow, which I am, God knows, in every sense of the word!" she flashed passionately.

"Except the practical one," he sneered. "And I don't fancy, my Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox, that you will gain your practical widowhood for some time."

"Why have you come here?" she said in a hard voice, ignoring his remark altogether. She was calm again, and nearly as white as the statue against which the man was leaning. "Remember, the conditions upon which I allowed you £300 a year were that you should never return to England or attempt to annoy me in any way. You have after twenty years—during twelve of which you received the money through my solicitors—broken both parts of your compact. Why do you come here, when for eight years you have not applied for the money that was the means of providing you with drink?"

She spoke bitterly, but the shabby intruder only smiled gently as he replied:

"My dear Vi, do keep your temper. I found that it was not so difficult to make money, after all. There were many more ways open to a scamp addicted to drink than to a major in the Army with a reputation to hold together. When I discarded the Army—or, rather, when I was cashiered from it—I was content to make shift on your pittance of £300 while I did nothing——"

"Except drink," she said coldly.

He smiled pleasantly. "Precisely; but I had sufficient sense left to keep drink *my* slave, than to be the slave myself. Then I suddenly found that there was a good chance of making money at—other things"—and a curious expression crossed his bloated face. "So that explains my reason for letting you revel in the luxury of imagining yourself my widow for eight years."

She turned on him sharply.

"Spare me any more details, please. All I wish to know is what you want here? My solicitors could have dealt with you without you forcing yourself on me. I have no money here—at least, not the amount you would require."

He looked at her narrowly. Her dark, passionate face, alive with bitter contempt, only served to amuse him. He was dead to all other feeling.

"I don't particularly want money, Vi," he answered insolently; "though when I do I shall not hesitate to ask for it. But you seem to have forgotten, my precious wife, that scamp and social pariah as I am, I am still your husband; and Major Richard Frayne-Lennox intends to live with his wife once more, and so scare off would-be suitors to her lily-white hand. That is a masterstroke of policy, isn't it?"

"You would not dare!" she panted, her face flushing hotly. "Even my brother-in-law, Sir Cyprian Rust, believes me a widow; and all my friends think that Major Richard Frayne-Lennox went to South Africa when he was cashiered from the Army, and, enlisting in some Yeomanry company, was killed in action. You won't be such a madman as to dare to do the thing you suggest—to rake up, by your presence in Society, the story of your disgrace?"

He laughed quietly, and stroked the ends of his moustache with long, white fingers.

"Why not? I am not the only Society blackleg that faces the music. And," he sneered, "with the support of my lovely wife, who receives me back, the Society sheep will follow her example and forget the past."

"Never!" she said in a low, tense voice. "You shall never receive any support from me! I will never acknowledge you again!"

"How will you prevent my coming here, then?" he retorted. "What force will you bring to bear upon me?"

"We are joined together by holy matrimony, and only death can break our tie!"

SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Sir Cyprian is Startled.

She leant forward, her dark eyes flashing with suppressed excitement, and her breath coming and going in quick gasps.

"A force you do not think I possess! I have only to furnish a certain person with the knowledge that you are in England again, alive, and you will be arrested on the charge of doctoring the figures on a cheque that was trusted to you! I knew of it, and was always prepared to use this threat should you ever attempt to see me again or annoy me. Now you know that unless within twenty-four hours I receive a tele-

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gram to say you have left England I shall acquaint the proper person with the fact that you are still living and in London."

While she had been speaking the man's dissolute face had turned to a livid colour and his eyes had sent a furtive glance round the room in case she had been overheard.

"So you knew of that," he muttered. "You would fling your husband into gaol?"

She laughed a chilly laugh. "I have long since ceased to regard you in that light. To me you are a blot on the escutcheon of my happiness, and unless you swear to go away from me I shall do as I have said—and you know best whether you can prove your innocence."

A low imprecation escaped the lips of the man who had once been a major in His Majesty's Army. Then he said sullenly:

"All right, I'll go. You've got the whip-hand this time; but you needn't fancy," he continued, with a savage snarl, "that I shall allow you to receive further proposals of marriage. The moment I hear of your name being coupled with that of any other man I shall return and chance everything. You can't get rid of me, my lady! We are joined together by 'holy matrimony,' and only death can break our tie."

She shivered, and her face grew very pale and icy as she said contemptuously:

"To me you are dead already. But I still retain my self-respect, notwithstanding the fact that I am your wife and, keeping it, I am not likely to commit the crime of bigamy; since I see that I am linked by a chain of hate to the effigy of a husband. Now leave me," she went on; "the window through which you came may be your exit."

He laughed coarsely.

"Then I'm hanged if I don't go through the hall door, as any of your other guests, my lady! Should your well-bred acquaintances question you as to the identity of the shabby loafer who came out of your drawing-room you may acknowledge me as your husband, Major Richard Frayne-Lennox. I shall not object."

With a supercilious gesture towards the silent woman, whose dark eyes sparkled with suppressed loathing, he moved in the direction of the door, and, passing through it, found himself at the top of a wide staircase opening into an alcove, flanked on either side by tall palms, and in the centre was a fairy fountain, half hidden by foliage and tobacco-plants, only the soft sprinkle of the water revealing the fact that there was anything behind them.

As the eyes of the outcast dwelt with a cynical smile at the luxury round him, a man's voice making some laughing remark sent a strange expression into his eyes, and he drew, back with a sudden glide behind a velvet portière.

Three figures had come out of an adjoining room—that of a girl, radiant in white, and two men. They paused with their backs to the portière to gaze at a picture to which the girl had referred.

"Yes," said one of the men—and the listener behind the arras recognised the voice of the man who had threatened a few moments ago to kick him out of his own wife's drawing-room—"it is a very fine picture, Miss Rust, but I fancy that I could show you a better one of the same subject on my own walls. You must come and see it one day with your aunt, if Sir Cyprian will allow you."

The man pressed against the wall strained his ears to catch, not the reply of the girl, but that of the man who had spoken first and had been silent since the three paused before the picture.

"I will be very pleased for Marcella to accompany her aunt," said the suave, aristocratic tones of Sir Cyprian Rust. "I am sorely tempted to plead for an invitation also, Mr. Johnson. I am a collector myself of originals and rare prints, and were I not obliged to return to my hermitage shortly I would love nothing better than to criticise your old master."

"I shall be pleased to submit it to the judgment of so keen a critic," said the financier drily.

He was inwardly amused at the meeting with the wealthy art-collector, who had been a seedy young artist in the days when his cousin had made her unfortunate marriage. He wondered cynically how the baronet would have fared had that cousin put a son in his shoes.

He turned to his companions suddenly. "While you are admiring the beauty of Leonardo di Vinci's masterpiece, Miss Rust, I will go in search of Lady Violet, whom I left in the drawing-room."

Marcella smiled an assent, and as the ponderous figure of Caleb J. Johnson strolled away the eyes of the baronet sparkled with satisfaction.

Inside the drawing-room the financier paused. It was empty save for a motionless figure in a robe of shimmering sequins.

"Now the family scapegoat has departed," he said softly, "we will pick up the thread of our conversation, Lady Violet."

She flung out her hand, with a hard little laugh.

"Ah, Mr. Johnson, a thread once broken can never be cemented together again. We must let the loose strand go now and consider new ones."

"You mean——" he said quietly.

"That I must forget that there was a question to answer," she went on gently. "And you, Mr. Johnson, must forget that there was an answer to your question."

The financier laughed shortly. He had not expected this resistance from the aristocrat whom he had decided would make a fitting mistress of his wealth—like a jewel in a setting of gold. And her sudden change of front piqued him, making her ten thousand times more desirable in his eyes.

"If you go down into the City, Lady Violet," he said quietly, "you will learn that Caleb J. Johnson always sticks to his guns and never gives up what he has set his mind on. And opposition only strengthens his determination to gain his ends. He has conquered where most men have gone under, and—he's going to conquer now. Do you know why?"

She shook her head wearily. His strength was beginning to frighten her.

"Because he has not only thrown his mind into this deal but his heart as well, Lady Violet. And the game must be to him."

"Stop, Mr. Johnson!" she cried. "You don't understand. I can never say 'Yes' to your question. There is a barrier that even your brain and will cannot overlook."

He took a step towards her, and the twinkling, star-like eyes shone with the light of conquest.

"A barrier, eh, Lady Violet? One that concerns that scamp of a—relation, eh? Oh, don't start," he said blandly. "I am quite able to understand that there are wheels within wheels; but a clever man may sometimes stop those wheels from going round, Lady Violet."

She looked at him with startled eyes. "What—what do you mean, Mr. Johnson?"

The financier leant forward, smiling with that exultant expression well known in Wall Street and Capel Court when a crisis had loomed perilously near the impregnable position of the "Gold King."

"I mean that within a very short time, Lady Violet, you will be sending a notice to the *Morning Post* announcing your engagement to the millionaire, Caleb J. Johnson, of New York City."

* * * * *

In the meantime Marcella and her father, Sir Cyprian Rust, were admiring the pictures in the hall, while the figure behind the portière waited impatiently for them to move.

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"Marcella," said Sir Cyprian's soft voice, "come here, child; I wish to speak to you."

He drew the girl away from the fountain to a portion of the alcove away from the curtain.

The man seized his chance. Creeping softly from his hiding-place, he quickly concealed himself behind the palms and foliage that hung over the fountain, and peered furtively at the man and his daughter who now faced him.

"Yes, father," said Marcella obediently; "what is it?"

Sir Cyprian turned his head sharply. "What was that noise, child?" he said suddenly. "It sounded as though someone had pushed past the palms."

Marcella laughed. "It's only the wind, father; I heard it too."

"I wish you to observe minutely," continued Sir Cyprian, "the difference between the copy of the 'Mona Lisa' here and the one that Mr. Johnson says he possesses. I am unable to stay in town myself, so wish my little girl to be eyes for me and to learn to discern between the real and the unreal. Besides, Mr. Johnson's Park Lane residence teems with priceless gems in art and jewels."

Marcella looked interested. "I will be so glad to help you, father," she said softly, "and will specially notice all that you point out to me in the future. You are sure I can help you, father?"

Sir Cyprian smiled slowly. "More than you think, my dear. I shall be pleased if my little girl can assist me. You know my weakness for such collections."

The figure behind the palms stifled a chuckle by waving the branches of one of the palms violently to and fro.

"This is a wretchedly draughty place," Sir Cyprian muttered; "you had better join your aunt, my dear."

As the girl obeyed him he looked after her with a curious smile on his blonde, handsome face, unconscious of a pair of keen, blue eyes peering at him through the leaves not far away.

"That is rather a neat idea to use *her!* Besides, I am not sure that I can rely on the other. She knows too much to be trustworthy."

He drew out a cigar-case, and fingered a cigar with thoughtful fingers, a slow smile still curving his well-cut mouth.

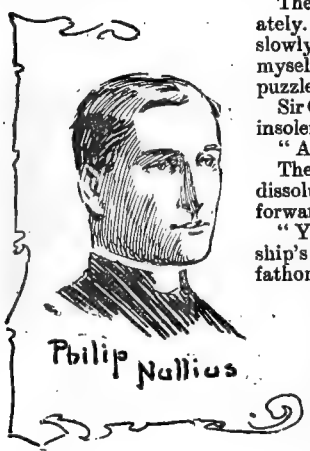
"A very good idea" he muttered—"a very good idea!"

Suddenly the anxious gaze of the man who had once been a gentleman flashed with a strange expression. The cluster of charms that hung from Sir Cyprian's broad gold albert came under the sudden glint of light which danced in particular upon a tiny bright coin, something like a sovereign, hanging among the rest of the baronet's trinkets.

The man drew in his breath with a sibilant sound and made a sudden rush forward.

Quick as lightning the baronet sprang forward and clutched the stranger's collar.

"So, you rascal!" he exclaimed, "that was your little game—was it?"



The man looked at him desperately. "I am no thief," he said slowly; "I only wished to assure myself of a certain thing that had puzzled me."

Sir Cyprian laughed: the fellow's insolence amused him.

"And what was that?"

The shabby outcast with the dissolute, reprobate face leant forward and whispered hoarsely:

"You cannot summon her ladyship's lackeys, Sir Cyprian; I have fathomed something that has baffled and worried me for some very long time. I recognised the sign of one of the secret leaders of a certain society of which I know a little. It is the Sign of the Spade among your other charms, Sir Cyprian. The order is honoured by such a noble member, whose face has been withheld for so long, but whose brain has done such good work for it."

Slowly, and with a curious tightening of his blonde skin, the baronet let go the man's collar.

"You had better make yourself scarce, my good fellow!" he said slowly after a pause. "Others may not look upon you as the harmless crank that I do."

As the man, with a mocking laugh, ran swiftly past the astonished servants out into the street Sir Cyprian fell back into his chair, looking strangely old, and the hand that swept his brow trembled slightly.

"A very awkward meeting," he muttered; "but I shall not allow it to go further! That fellow must not recognise me again. He may become dangerous, and—on the other hand, he may not!"

A gentle sigh fluttered to his lips, and a steel-like gleam flickered in his seraphic eyes as he repeated softly:

"On the other hand, he may not. I must see Debenham to-morrow. There is no time to be lost"

EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Marcella Makes an Enemy.

THE following day Sir Cyprian Rust returned from Crawley, and after spending the whole of the morning in the City, he appeared at lunch looking as though everything had gone well with him, for his smile was gentle, and his voice softly sympathetic as he asked his lovely sister-in-law whether a drive would not do both her headache and Marcella good.

Lady Violet looked at him sharply. "How do you know that I have a headache?" she said wonderingly.

Sir Cyprian smiled deprecatingly. "It does not tax my ingenuity to suppose that the dinner of last night has had the morning effect of making you feel just a little fagged," he answered suavely. "Most women would feel the strain of entertaining a millionaire like Mr. Caleb J. Johnson!"

A faint colour stained Lady Violet's creamy skin, which the baronet's smiling blue eyes were keen to note.

"Mr. Johnson," she said, slowly, "is not so objectionable as his wealth suggests. And as for entertaining him," she smiled slightly, "I think he did that for himself."

"I am glad you constitute yourself such a champion of the Gold King," laughed Sir Cyprian genially, "for he has invited you and Marcella to tea, I believe, one day this week. I trust you will accept it," he went on, gazing steadily at the white, set face. "I particularly desire Marcella to see that original of Leonardo da Vinci's he claims to possess, so take her with you, Violet."

Lady Violet's eyes rested for a moment on the fresh beauty of the girl, who was looking particularly happy and radiant in a gown of simply-made, blue serge that fitted the lithe young figure to perfection, and her lips trembled with a momentary weakness.

"I shall most certainly take Marcella with me," she answered slowly, "but she must curb her impatience until Mr. Johnson invites us, though," she added, her mouth breaking into a sudden smile, "I must warn Marcella that the original 'Mona Lisa' of Leonardo da Vinci hangs in the Louvre! And it would be difficult for even Mr. Johnson's money to buy that! However, his copy may be a very good one!"

Marcella laughed brightly. "I am afraid, Aunt Violet," she said, "that I have not inherited father's taste for originals, and am quite happy with a copy! I have not the artistic temperament. I suppose I am like my mother. Father tells me she was no artist."

Lady Violet did not answer, but under her breath she murmured: "Thank God for it!" Then she raised her eyes

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to her brother-in-law's face, and after a quick, half-questioning, half-appealing glance into his boyish blue eyes that told her nothing, averted her head.

"By the way," said Edward Day languidly, turning his fair, insipidly handsome face towards Lady Violet, "are you aware, Aunt Vi, that you had a most undesirable guest last night?"

Sir Cyprian, who had entered into a conversation with Marcella, suddenly paused, and watched his sister-in-law's face intently. He had puzzled greatly over the presence of the shabby, swaggering man who had appeared so suddenly from behind the foliage round the fountain, and a brief suspicion had taken root in his mind that perhaps his lovely sister-in-law could throw some light on it.

Lady Violet raised her brows with a puzzled expression.

"An undesirable guest, Edward?" she repeated. "Surely not! We were almost a family party last night."

"Anyway," Edward Day said, with a laugh, "I saw a beggarly-looking chap running down the stairs and out into the hall! It occurred to me at the time that he was discovered in some pilfering in one of the rooms, but as he was allowed to go scot-free, I concluded he must have been admitted in the ordinary way."

"Really, Edward, I am afraid I am not informed of the coming and going of all the inmates or visitors in the house!" Lady Violet laughed. "Possibly it was one of the tradesmen leaving something!"

When Sir Cyprian was saying "good-bye," his sister-in-law drew him aside.

"Is it any use my asking you to let me off taking her with me? Can you not release me from that pain?"

He looked at her with mild reproof.

"My dear Violet, it is my wish that my daughter should accompany you to the house of Mr. Johnson, or to any other friend whom you may be visiting. She is a clever girl, with a marvellous gift of description and assimilation. I shall make her a most useful companion in time!" and a mocking smile curved his fine mouth.

Lady Violet's pale cheeks grew even paler, and her dark eyes flashed with suppressed emotion, as she said pleadingly:

"Don't sully that spotless nature with your diabolical genius! Let her at least keep outside the mire and the gutter that our feet are embedded in! Have you no mercy—no sense of humanity that will deter you from making a tool of that most precious creature?"

Sir Cyprian smiled satirically. "Surely, Violet," he murmured gently, "you are labouring under some mistaken idea? How should I want to do anything that would hurt my own child? I only wish to cultivate in her a love of the beautiful in art! Do you blame me for that?"

With a spurt of sudden courage she replied in the same low voice. "You need not keep up that pretence with me, Cyprian! I know you through and through, and I warn you that if I notice one single change in Marcella that your evil influence may work, I shall brave everything, be hated even, and put her on her guard! Tell her *who* and *what* you are! Don't drive me too far; a worm will turn, you know, and I am a desperate woman!"

Sir Cyprian looked at her without replying. She had for so long been passive that he was secretly taken aback by her new attitude. It suggested a stronger influence in her life than his had been, one that undermined the power he had wielded for so many years.

Was it the influence of another man? he wondered, or an even deeper one—the love of a woman of the world for an innocent girl? He was inclined to think it the latter; the one he could stem in its course, but the former would take her for ever out of his reach.

"It rests with yourself entirely, my dear Violet," he answered in a kind tone, "whether Marcella remains a happy girl, ignorant of those things of which you would inform her, or in a very much worse position in life.

"Think," he went on, "how would you improve her prospects by telling her what you threaten? Would she thank you for the information? I think not. Marcella is a proud girl, with a hatred of anything underhand or mercenary. You would lose her altogether then!"

A change passed over the mobile face of the listening woman. She could not but admit the truth of his statement.

"One thing more!" she murmured. "Suppose I were in a position to repay you all the money you had given me—since—since then, would you let me have her? She could come without knowing the worst! I would tell her nothing of the past. I would be so glad to keep her with me on any terms."

The baronet's handsome face hardened. "On no conditions will I ever allow Marcella to remain with you longer than a week—or so long as I desire," he replied curtly. "And, as to repayment, I shall never consent to receive such a thing at your hands! So, my dear sister-in-law, you must consider the subject closed from now! Neither of us can afford to go back! If you play your cards properly you may enjoy Marcella's society as often as you like—with reservation—but so much as hint to her one little thing, and she will be dead to you!"

When the waiting carriage had driven off with Sir Cyprian to the station, Lady Violet went slowly in search of Marcella. She was thinking of the last speech of her task-master, and her expression was a curious one.

As she left the library the butler met her with a telegram on a salver.

She took it up idly, and opening it, read:

"*Have left England as promised, shall not worry you again.*"

With a sense of relief she crushed the orange-tinted envelope into a ball. That episode was finished then. She need no longer live in dread of a scandal. The other portion of the skeleton in her cupboard had kept his word. She began to think kindly of this man she had once married—how many years ago she hardly liked to think. Nothing remained to bring him back to her thoughts—nothing.

A sound fell upon her ear with a sinister mockery. It was the light, sudden laugh of Marcella, ringing and bell-like, innocent of the effect of her mirth.

Lady Violet bit her lip sharply. She realised for the first time that she could never quite forget the man in the shabby clothes.

At the door of her boudoir she paused. Marcella was talking to Edward Day, her nephew, who was also her secretary, and for whom she entertained a kindly pity rather than love.

"Please don't ask me again, Mr. Day," Marcella was saying in her honest, straightforward way. "I could never marry you, because I do not love you! Please let this be final between us! I know you very slightly, and don't think I could ever be anything more than I am to you now—a good friend!"

"But I love you, Marcella!" Edward answered eagerly. "And will teach you to love me! Besides, it is my aunt's dearest wish that we should marry; she has told me so, and I know you love her!"

The girl's voice softened. "Yes, I love Aunt Violet, but I know she would not wish me to sacrifice myself in marrying a man I did not love! It would be unlike her!"

The young man's fair face clouded. He had calculated that with the daughter of the rich Sir Cyprian Rust as his wife he would be able to settle his most pressing debts without letting his aunt know of them. And the knowledge that Marcella was not so pliable as he thought was an awkward awakening.

"Come!" he said, forcing a smile to his lips, "you are naturally startled, as all girls are at their first proposal, and don't know your own mind. But you will think this over, won't you, and see if you can give me any hope?"

Marcella shook her head. She was sorry to hurt him, but her mind was made up for all time

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"I can never say anything else, Edward," she answered sadly. "I do not love you, and I will not marry you! Please drop the subject."

An ugly look stole into the weak, dissipated face of the man.

"I suppose you have met your future husband already?" he sneered, "among the classic population of the village of Crawley! What is he? The village doctor, or the village curate?"

A sudden wave of colour stained the girl's pale face. "You are impertinent!" she said quietly. "Surely such manners are a drawback to success! Will you kindly leave the room, or shall I?"

"Oh, don't get on the high horse!" he said sullenly. "I suppose I am a fool to speak as I do, but, in spite of my manners, I really love you, Marcella. And considering all I know about you, you ought to be glad that any decent chap should wish to make you his wife. Money's not everything, you know!"

Marcella caught her breath with a sudden gasp, and the silent woman at the door imitated her unconsciously.

"I don't understand," Marcella said haughtily. "Were you not my aunt's nephew I should be inclined to think that her footman was in the room. Explain yourself at once!"

"Will you marry me, Marcella?" said Edward Day. "Will you be my wife?"

An uneasy laugh broke from Edward Day, the craven coward. He had expected tears, not hauteur.

"I mean that you can't have everything," he retorted. "And in spite of being an heiress, you would find most men fight shy of you if they knew what I do, although you are handsome and unlike other girls!"

Marcella eyed him contemptuously. "Say what you have to say, don't suggest. I am quite able to bear it, I can assure you!"

He flushed darkly. "Are you? Then all I will say now is, ask your father, Sir Cyprian, where your mother died, and why there is no headstone to her memory in the churchyard at Crawley! There is something strange about the different reports of her supposed death!" he added maliciously.

There was a silence alive with signs of a coming storm, then Marcella spoke.

"When you asked me to marry you, I was sorry I could not say 'yes,' because I considered that you had done me the greatest honour a man can do a woman, but now that I see you can stoop in your jealous spite to insult not only myself but"—and her voice quivered slightly—"the memory of a dead mother, I have only the most bitter contempt for you."

"And I also!" added another voice in tones of deep indignation, and Lady Violet came forward slowly, gazing with blazing eyes at the crestfallen young bully. Then she said slowly:

"I will speak with you later. I need only mention now that your conduct is the most pitiful and disgraceful exhibition I have ever witnessed. I am only glad that after all you have no blood-tie with myself!"

Muttering an excuse, and with a sullen expression on his weak face, Edward Day left the room, but when he got outside he shook his hand at the door and whispered hoarsely:

"All right, score as much as you like now, I shall have my innings soon, and pay back the snub I have received, my haughty Miss Marcella! I'm not good enough for you, eh? We'll see! I shall never rest now until I find out *something* that will give me a hold over you. And then," he laughed vindictively, "you will be glad to come off your pedestal when I choose to ask you!"

NINTH CHAPTER.
Fortune's Wheel.

When they were alone, Marcella went up to her aunt with a tremulous laugh.

"You must think me very foolish, dear aunt Violet, to have been so easily annoyed with Edward," she said timidly, "but I do not mind him abusing me, though that was very uncalled-for, but when he suggested fearful things about—about that dear mother whom I do not remember, but whom I love and honour with all my heart, I—I—could not restrain my temper!"

Lady Violet clasped the girl to her tenderly. "Dearest," she said in a low, earnest voice; "I love to see that the memory of the mother you have lost is still fresh and dear to you. I am sure that—that——" her voice faltered, "could she see you now, as I do, and hold you in her arms as I am holding you, she would rejoice in the love of a daughter like you."

"And you are not vexed because I could not give Edward any other answer?" Marcella queried after a pause.

Lady Violet shuddered. "No, darling; I am glad you gave the answer you did. In every respect Edward is no fit husband for you. He is weak, and without any sense of honour or principle. I am sadly disappointed in him, but he shall not annoy you again!"

"And you don't think," Marcella continued in a low voice, "that he meant anything by what he said about my mother and there being no headstone or plate to her memory in the church at Crawley, or even her grave there?"

Lady Violet frowned and her eyes did not meet those of the girl as she answered soothingly:

"Edward was in such a rage, dear child, that you must not heed anything he said. Your dear mother died abroad, so that accounts for her grave not being in Crawley churchyard. It was her wish, I believe, to be buried in the place where she died, and you know how absent-minded Sir Cyprian, your father, is! It would not occur to him that he should put a plate in the church."

Before Marcella could make any comment, Lady Violet continued quickly: "I want you, Marcella, to promise me that you will let me know at once should you ever need a friend in any great trouble, or write to me should you notice anything that puzzles you at the 'Court.' Promise me this, dear, because I shall know then that I may consider myself bound to you in any trouble that should befall you! I can only see you so rarely, dear, that I would be very happy with such an assurance from you!"

Marcella laughed softly. "Dear aunt Violet, why, of course, you are the first person to whom I should fly in any trouble or worry! In fact, I sometimes wish you were always with me," she added impulsively; "you are just the best substitute for the mother I have lost!"

Lady Violet winced, then smiled through sudden tears.

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Dupes of Destiny

(continued.)

"Then that is a bargain, dear," she said gently; "I am your mother by proxy! That will be a secret between us!"

"Why don't you return to the 'Court' with me, aunt Violet?" Marcella asked, with a bewitching smile.

The eyes of the woman of fashion, whose name was being linked with that of a millionaire, contracted suddenly:

"I am a town product, dear," she said lightly, "the country bores me unutterably. But my heart will be with you, and sometimes your father will allow you to come and stay with me."

"I love the 'Court'!" said Marcella thoughtfully; "though it is fearfully dull at times! Even father grew morbid one day," she laughed. "He made his will, leaving everything he had to me, and I made mine making him my heir and sole executor! What I don't know, but it amused us!"

Lady Violet caught her arm suddenly.

"What—what—made him do that?" she stammered; "you have nothing, Marcella, to leave! By Sir Basil Wingate's will that made your father his heir, the money and the title at his death have been willed to an elder son of yours, should you marry—but—but you have no right to make a will, dear! Sir Basil hated women, since his only daughter ran away from him and so left everything that would only benefit male heirs. Had your father had a *son* he would have been that heir—but as it is, the estate and title with the money will revert to *your* son!"

Marcella laughed. "What a stupid idea! But I don't want money! I shall be perfectly happy, just having you, aunt Violet!"

The older woman smiled wistfully, as she moved towards the door.

"One day you will marry, dear, a man you love, I hope; and then I shall take a back seat, naturally!"

A slight flush stained the girl's clear skin as the vision of a dark, earnest face with steadfast, grey eyes rose before her—the face of the village curate, Philip Nullius.

Lady Violet noticed the blush, and woman-like, knew that there was a rival already in the field for the love she had so long been deprived of. But when she was alone her thoughts went back to the sentence in which Marcella had said that she and her father had "made their wills in each other's favour!"

What did it mean? she wondered anxiously. That there was an undercurrent of danger she could not but think, knowing the nature of the man who never did the most simple action without one or two powerful motives as the outcome of his simplicity.

"The life of poor Laura was insured!" she murmured, "for twenty thousand pounds, and the child's also! But that was nearly twenty-one years ago! Had he wished to benefit by it surely such a thing would have happened—earlier! It cannot be now—that some diabolical plot has occurred to him!

"No—no—how foolish I am," she muttered with white lips; "that cannot be; it would be too dangerous, and so far he has avoided that measure! No, something fresh has happened to cause him to think of making wills. I must watch carefully without letting him suspect that I am doing so, or I shall only hasten the plan he has in his mind, and be prevented from seeing her."

Still thinking deeply she rang the bell and requested that Mr. Day should be sent to her if he were still in the house.

When, after a few minutes, Edward Day presented himself before the woman who had been his best friend for so many years, he knew that he had lost his one chance of making anything out of the future generosity of Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox.

She looked at him coldly. "I wish to come to the point at once," she said distantly; "I will not touch on the subject of your insult to my niece, Miss Rust, but will inform you that I no longer desire your presence in my house! You are utterly unworthy the name of gentleman, and honour has no place in your vocabulary."

"Aunt Vi," the young man exclaimed incredulously; "don't kick me out like a cur because I fell in love with Marcella like any ordinary man!"

A sneer played about the mouth of Lady Violet.

"Unfortunately, like 'any ordinary man' you could not take your dismissal like a gentleman! But I am serious in telling you that I wish you to leave my house."

"Surely, aunt——" began the fair-faced young coward, "you are just a little hard on a chap!"

"I am not hard," she answered, "and now that you are leaving my house, I wish to tell you something that, had I seen you grow up as a gentleman and man of honour, I would always have kept from you, but your conduct and many extravagances have so disappointed me, that your final insult to Marcella Rust decided me in acquainting you with a fact that may perhaps be the means of making a man of you, though it may lower your vanity to the dust!"

"Tell me," he said hoarsely, "aunt Vi, don't bait me! I am in agony! What can you know about me?"

"To begin with," she went on slowly, "I am not your aunt! I took you out of pity from a fate for which you were probably intended. I was a first-class passenger on board a ship coming home from Australia, and a poor woman among the steerage passengers gave birth to two children. Out of pity I adopted one. That child—intended for a foundling, was yourself! Had you conducted yourself with the slightest sign of gratitude towards me," she finished coldly, "I would have spared you this!"

"And—and—I am a beggar?" he said painfully.

"No! I will allow you £250 a year because you grew up with extravagant ideas, for which I was to blame, and I am also giving you a chance of making a living for yourself. I have here a letter of introduction to Mr. Caleb J. Johnson, the financier. He may find you a post, and if you are steady, there is a good chance of your still doing well."

Unsteadily, and with a livid face, Edward Day found himself in his bedroom, with the letter of introduction to the man whose fellow guest he had been the night before. The change in his fortunes was so great that he could hardly feel it yet. He was only conscious of a deep hatred for the girl who had sent his prospects tottering, and a loathing for the woman who had opened his eyes to his real status! He drew out the letter and read:

DEAR MR. JOHNSON—*I am introducing to your kind notice my secretary, Mr. Edward Day, in the hope that you may be able to find him something to do. He is clever, and under an influence like yours, may be a credit to his sex yet, though he is still young and impulsive. Trusting you may oblige me in this, as I am now dispensing with his services, and do not like to throw him aside—I am, very sincerely yours,*

VIOLET FRAYNE-LENNOX.

For a few moments the secretary's face was not pleasant to look upon. It was vicious and vindictive.

He put the letter on the table and read it several times, carefully tracing the words with a dry pen over and over again. At last he seemed satisfied, and smiling grimly, he pulled a sheet of paper towards him, stamped with the address of the town house Lady Violet was occupying; and after spoiling several sheets of the paper, he turned out something that appeared to satisfy him.

"A pauper, am I? A nameless brat! All right, my dear 'aunt'! You have kindly turned me adrift, and it will be your letter of 'introduction' that will set me on my feet far above my expectations!"

Then, pulling the blotter towards him again, he began to write carefully a letter that seemed to require a great deal of care and thought.

At last he flung the pen on the table with a satisfied sigh, and laughed softly:

"Here begins my new life! I am armed *cap-à-pie!*"

(Another long instalment of this splendid serial next week.)

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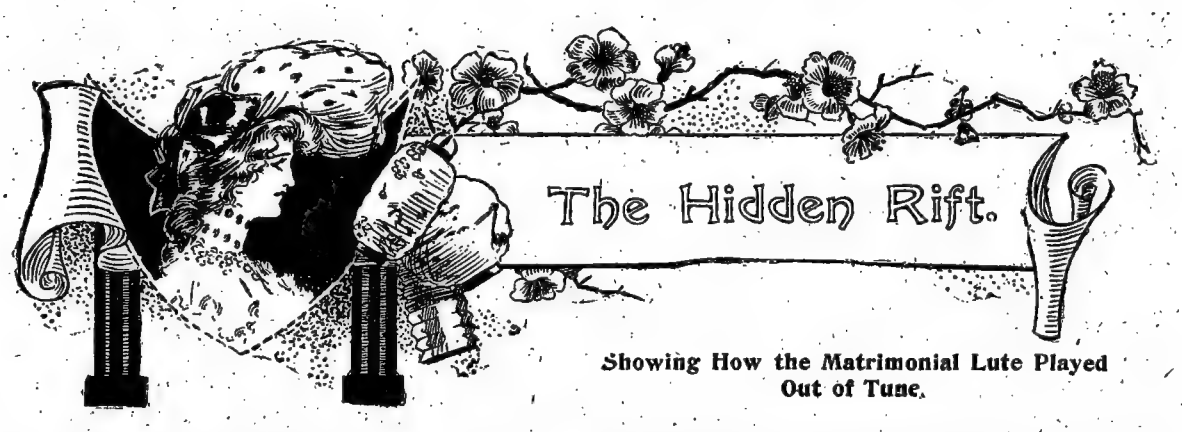

The Hidden Rift.

Showing How the Matrimonial Lute Played Out of Tune.

"If ever two persons were destined to be happy together, they are!" was the comment of old Mrs. Wilford, a distant connection of the Marchmont family, as she watched young Leslie Marchmont and his charming bride drive off in the carriage, followed by showers of rice and old slippers, on the way to the railway station, where they were to take tickets for Bournemouth to spend their honeymoon.

The sentiment was echoed very sincerely by the three or four people who chanced to overhear Mrs. Wilford's remark, and if the question had been addressed to all the other guests, "What chance do you think those newly-married people have of being supremely happy?" the answer would most probably have been to the effect that there was no possibility of their being otherwise than gloriously happy.

Leslie Marchmont and his young bride, Myra, had been devoted lovers for two years. Leslie was a fine fellow, with a splendid position as joint partner with his cousin—a much older man—in a firm that did a large export business and made a lot of money, to say nothing of the very solid private account with which his name was credited at the bank. Myra Lawrence was a charming girl with a sweet face and a lovable disposition. Everyone admired her, and, rare as such a thing is, she had no enemies. Her frank nature disarmed envy, hatred, and all uncharitableness on the part of others, and she was a general favourite.

Leslie looked down at his bride as they rolled along, and he was filled with tenderness and the pride of possession.

"I will take care of you, little girl!" he whispered softly, his voice quivering with love. "You are not afraid to trust yourself to me?"

"Why should I be, Leslie?" she answered in a sweet, low tone, looking up at him with an air of implicit trustfulness. Her long lashes were just tipped with suspicious moisture, but that was due to a combination of joy and sadness, the latter at the thought of leaving home. "I *know* that I shall be perfectly happy with you, dear!"

"My one thought will be to fill your life with contentment!" he whispered, and, taking advantage of the momentary seclusion, he bent still lower and kissed her.

Who could have supposed that there would be a rift in the lute, making the music of married life lose some of its tunefulness, within the course of a few months? Yet it was so, for Leslie Marchmont made a mistake so often made by young men; he had not sufficiently judged the character of the girl to whom he was so devoted. He was full of love, he imagined that he knew her disposition thoroughly, and could make her life glad, yet he had, in the exuberance of his passion, overlooked one important trait.

Myra looked back with considerable pride over the last five years of her life. She had always been fond of drawing, and at the age of seventeen she had begun to earn a reputation as a black and white artist, making sketches for the illustrated papers and weekly home journals. Her first accepted sketch was published in a ladies' journal, and from that time she went on steadily. It was not necessary for her to work with her pencil in order to maintain herself, for her parents were well-to-do, but it pleased her to devote some of her leisure to this work, and by so doing she earned enough money to keep herself, and to spend in doing good to others. She insisted on paying a certain sum for her board and lodging, and it gratified her to think that she was independent. It was not an obtrusive kind of independence; it was a feeling of dignity, and the parents encouraged it.

To Leslie, when he appeared on the scene and captured her young heart, she was the more attractive on that account, as he knew that she would be the kind of woman to encourage him by her bravery in moments when misfortune threatened, as it might do, however remote it appeared at that moment. Myra looked up to him as a prospective wife should, and thought only of making life pleasant for him. She knew that she would give up her work, but that was not a matter of importance. Her occupations would naturally be different. As to the money earned thereby, why, Leslie would be able to supply all that she needed quite easily.

It was just that spirit of dignified independence which Leslie failed to understand properly, and the result of this failure made itself apparent within the first nine months of their married life.

An attentive observer would have detected a difference in the bearing of these young people towards one another, yet it would have been difficult for him to have defined in what this difference consisted. There seemed to be an invisible barrier raising itself between them. Myra occasionally looked at Leslie as if she were waiting for him to say something, *hoping* that he would say something, and an expression of disappointment would cross her sweet face as she turned away. He had not uttered the words which she wanted to hear.

It gradually dawned on Leslie that something was amiss, and he could not understand it. Myra had all she wanted, he paid all the bills for the household, almost all their supplies being from firms with whom he ran an account, and settled that account by a monthly cheque, he purchased for her anything she desired in the way of dress, and he gave her money without hesitation when she asked him for some. He had often told her that she could have all she wanted in the way of cash, that she had only to mention the fact and he would write out a cheque or bring the gold home for her. What was it that was ailing her? She was not ill; in fact, he had never seen her in better health!

He resolved to question her on the point, but she was before him.

"Leslie," she said one morning, "I have a request to make."

He gazed at her in some surprise; the tone was just a trifle stiff, and not like that in which she usually made her requests, nor was the style of making the request in any way similar to her usual manner.

It was generally: "Leslie, dear, I want so-and-so; do you really think that you really have enough in the bank to meet

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such lavish expenditure?" And then would be a bright laugh, he would kiss the charming face, and the money would be transferred from his pocket to hers. Yet, as he heard this formal little speech, it occurred to him that those very informal expressions of their early married life had not been repeated lately.

"Certainly, dearest!" he exclaimed. "You know that I am only too pleased to let you have anything you desire!"

"I wish you to give me a separate allowance for my own personal use, Leslie," she said quietly, and if she had raised her hand to strike him he could not have been more surprised.

"I am at a loss to understand the reason of that request, Myra," he said, his own tones becoming rather stiff. "I grudge you nothing, you can have as much money as you desire. To ask me to let you have a private purse is to make a beginning of a system of divided interests which is not at all conducive to our happiness. What I have is yours, you can have it whenever you mention the fact; what more can you ask?"

"I think I ought to have a private purse to which I can go just as I please," she replied coldly. "It is humiliating to compel me to *ask* for everything I require or desire."

Leslie's mouth grew hard.

"It is entirely against my ideas of mutual confidence," he asserted doggedly. "You can have no need for a separate purse; all the bills are paid, you can have all you desire, I give you all the cash you wish for. Your request presents itself to me as the beginning of a division between us which I will not tolerate! I am willing to do most things for you, but not that! I believe you will see that you have been wrong when you reflect calmly on the subject!"

"I wish it!" she said, looking straight at him.

"And I do not!" he returned, meeting her gaze boldly.

For a few seconds they held one another's eyes; it was like the crossing of two blades, preparatory to a duel. Then Myra turned and passed out of the room.

"H'm!" muttered Leslie, flinging himself down into an easy chair. "What has come over Myra? I would have sworn by all that is good, at one time, that her temper was as sweet as honey, as smooth as oil, yet I have noticed lately, although I couldn't fathom the thing, that her temper was changing. She has been just a little irritable at times, and—— Well, perhaps not irritable," he corrected "but certainly less loving. What nonsense is this about a separate allowance? What can she want with money? Anything she likes to mention ——"

He stopped; after a pause, he added, slowly:

"She cannot want money for something which she is not willing to let me know about? No, it cannot be more than a fad; it will vanish, and she will be sorry!"

However, he looked in vain for any expression of regret from Myra, either in word or manner. He felt awkward when he returned to dinner that evening; he had a sentiment of sheepishness as he opened his front door and let himself into his own house. How would Myra meet him? He told himself that he was quite right to refuse, yet he had a uneasy feeling within him.

He found Myra as usual waiting for him at the table, ready to ring for the dinner to be brought in. She was just the same as ever, and the dinner was perfect. He felt half-ashamed of the thought that had crossed his mind, namely, that she would show her resentment by not ministering to him as in the past, and by neglecting the care of the house which had so materially contributed to their happiness. And by the time the meal was concluded, he was wholly ashamed of the thought.

The days glided past; Myra never mentioned the episode of her formal request. She was the same Myra, he told himself illogically, only—only different!

"Do you want any money, dearest?" he asked her pleasantly, nearly a week later. His geniality was partly assumed for the purpose of hiding his perplexity.

"No, Leslie, thank you!" she replied in the same tone.

"Oh, all right!" he answered, feeling uncomfortable, without exactly understanding why. "I'll write you out a cheque whenever you like, you know!"

"Yes, I know, dear!" she replied, as she raised her face for the parting kiss.

"She is still a little sore about it, I fear," he murmured in a disappointed tone. "She doesn't like to ask me just for a while. I know what I'll do, and that will make it all smooth again."

That evening, after dinner, he stole up to her special room and placed a roll of ten bank notes in the drawer among her gloves and other feminine accessories, as he had smilingly described them.

"She is sure to find them, and then she will be all smiles, and she will come behind my chair, put both hands on my cheeks, draw my head back, and kiss me as she used to do. Ah!" And the memory of those blissful moments raised him to the zenith of delight.

He waited for Myra to speak about that roll of notes; his eyes began to twinkle with pleasure whenever he came home during the next week, but Myra said never a word. Nevertheless, she did not ask for money, and he concluded that she had seen the notes and made use of them.

"She couldn't miss them," he said to himself. "As soon as she put her hand in the drawer she would feel the crisp roll. I expect ——" He meditated for a minute. "Yes, that's it. She is a wee bit awkward about mentioning it, although she has used the money and is glad that I have been so——"

He was at a loss for the proper word; "kind" did not seem to be appropriate, and while he was trying to find the correct adjective, the word "inconsistent" flashed across his brain, and it made him warm.

"No, I don't think it is inconsistency on my part," he objected. "If I place a roll of notes in her drawer to do as she likes with, that is different from a separate allowance. Of course I don't want her to tell me about every penny she spends, but that divided interest notion is—it isn't pleasant!"

He paced the room for a few seconds.

"I'll ask her for a kiss," he muttered. "She only wants a good opportunity for reconciliation, and when I look into her sweet eyes as I see her face raised to mine—why, that will settle it, and we shall be happy again."

"Do you want any cash, Myra?" he asked with assumed innocence, as he was preparing to depart on the following morning.

"No, thank you, dear!"

Leslie repressed a smile.

"You are very economical, dearest!" he remarked meaningly. Then, relapsing into a smile that was intended to be a sign of reconciliation, he said: "Do I not deserve a kiss?"

He bent and kissed her, expecting a warm salute; he had almost felt her arms round his neck, in imagination; but he had the greatest of all disappointments in love—that of a kiss accepted, but not returned. Myra's lips were not responsive, only receptive.

Leslie succeeded in concealing his mortification and went off; when near the front door he pretended to have thought of something upstairs. His real object was to peep into that drawer. He shivered as he did so; the roll of notes lay there untouched.

He was in a moody frame of mind when he entered his

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private office, where his partner was reclining in an office chair.

"Good morning, old chap!" was Harrison's greeting. "Glad to see your wife has not lost her skill as a result of marriage." He pointed to an open copy of the *Illustrated Times*. "That's a capital sketch."

Like one in a dream, Leslie glanced at the illustration indicated and saw his wife's monogram in the corner. It was fortunate that Harrison was indulging in an extensive yawn and did not pull himself round till Marchmont had regained his wonted coolness.

"Glad you think it's good," replied Leslie, with assumed modesty. "Many letters this morning?"

They then fell to about business and the incident passed. This, then, was his wife's answer to his refusal. In the first flush of vexation, his worse self tried to find some fault with Myra's conduct during the past few days, since that scene; but he was bound to admit that she had been the most careful, the most attentive of wives. And, slowly, he admitted that he had made a mistake.

His better self now conquered. It demands a good deal of courage and nobility of character to confess fully that one is in fault, but Leslie reached that stage before the luncheon hour, and he resolved to leave business for the rest of the day, go home, and take Myra out somewhere. They would have a drive in an open carriage in the rural lanes that were not far from their home; Myra always liked that, and then he would yield and ask for forgiveness.

"I say, dearest," he said, as she looked up in surprise at his return, "things are flat to-day, so I have come home to take you for a drive. I have ordered the fly. It won't take you long to get ready, will it?"

"I am sorry I cannot go this afternoon, Leslie," she replied, paling a little. "I have—something to do."

"Oh, the *Illustrated Times* can wait," he remarked, with an attempt at gaiety. "I have——"

"I am not doing work for the *Times* this afternoon," she said, her face flushing slightly. "I have some menu cards to paint for Mrs. Gascoyne's dinner-party, and they must be finished to-day!"

"Myra! You are not working for our friends?" He shrank back in dismay.

"Why not? She would pay someone else to do them, so I may as well take the money from her. What does it matter whether I receive pay from her or from a journal for work done?"

"Why do you do it?" he groaned.

"I grew tired of being compelled to *ask* whenever I wanted some pocket money," she responded quietly. "As I told you, it was humiliating. I thought that a husband would prefer that his wife should be spared *that*, and I was surprised that you made no arrangement. Then I asked you to do it, and you declined. I could not humiliate myself further, so I turned to my old work, to create what you ought to have allowed but refused to do."

"Then I ask that, at least, you will not lower my pride by working for friends, as though I kept you without funds," he cried.

Once again their eyes met, and they held one another's gaze for what seemed quite a long time. As they gazed into each other's eyes, the defiant look changed, the hardness died away, and an expression of yearning and repentance took its place.

"I was wrong. I came home to confess it and ask for forgiveness, Myra," cried Leslie, holding out his arms. "I failed to understand."

"I was wrong, too," she cried, a little catch in her voice. "I forgot that I might be humiliating you by working for Mrs. Gascoyne. And I ought to have explained differently when I required a separate allowance. Perhaps I have been *too* independent!"

"No, no!" he almost shouted, as he took her in his arms. "Oh, Myra, I am so glad that this miserable trouble is ended."

Myra finished the menu cards, according to promise, but she did no more work of that kind, and even for that she requested Mrs. Gascoyne to give the remuneration to a local charity. She did an occasional sketch for the journals, just for amusement, but she always devoted the proceeds to charitable purposes, for her husband allowed her more than enough.

The rift in the matrimonial lute was sealed, and the old tunefulness returned.

G. E. Lingen.

Your Editor Chats.

This is the last number of another volume. In a few days you will be hearing the bells "Ring out the old, ring in the new," and at the same time they will be heralding the first number of our new volume.

On glancing rapidly through the volume which this issue brings to an end, I am struck with the number of improvements that have been made in it over the previous ones, and I feel now that the excellent fiction matter of which it is composed is served up in a very tasty manner. Yet I do not intend to let *Short Stories* rest on its laurels, but I am going to make a big effort (and it will need it, too!) to bring this little paper a few more rungs up the ladder of Perfection, and some totally new and original features will be introduced.

I often receive cheery and encouraging missives from my readers, and these show that my attempts to please you have not been in vain. I sincerely trust that I shall number all my readers of 1903 amongst the increased *clientèle* of 1904. You have at this juncture of *Short Stories'* history a fine opportunity to introduce the paper to your friends, both male and female, as the new serial by Blanche Eardley, that commenced last week, is likely to be very popular. "Dupes of Destiny" is destined to be one of the most popular serials we have ever had. Remind your friends that they can start reading to-day, as the synopsis will give them the complete thread of the story.

"A Criminal Millionaire" is drawing to a conclusion, thrilling and effective. This serial, which has excited great interest among my readers, will be followed by a very powerful series of revelations, told by the chief figure in the series herself. These amazing episodes will be entitled, "Decoyed!" and the heroine will tell of the adventures that befell her at the hands of those who laid their schemes to entrap her. I will tell you more about this coming series next week.

Bolton carries off the guinea that I offered for what I considered the best solution of the Unsolved Love Problem, "The Doubt of Mildred Dalrymple."

The fortunate gentleman is Mr. S. Chorlton, of 227 Spa Road, Bolton, and he expressed his arguments in a very terse but conclusive form.

By the number of solutions received from readers I should judge this problem to be one of the most interesting of the series.

Do not forget that next Monday, December 28th, is the very last day on which I can receive letters in reply to "The Duty of Roger Forbes." Full particulars of this problem appeared in our Christmas number.

December 31st is the closing day for the Statue Competition and the Running Riddles Competition announced in our Christmas number.

Your Editor.

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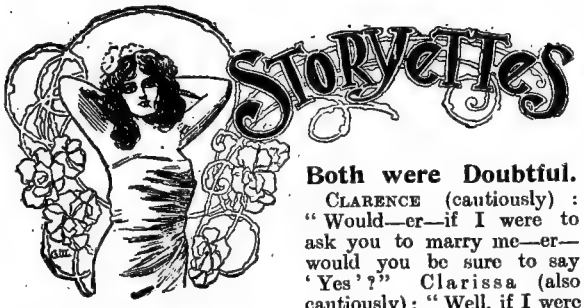

Both were Doubtful.

Clarence (cautiously) : "Would—er—if I were to ask you to marry me—er—would you be sure to say 'Yes'?" Clarissa (also cautiously): "Well, if I were to say 'Yes'—er—would you be sure to ask me—er—to marry you? I'd like to be sure on that point."

Radium *v.* Gold.

He: "Darling, you are worth your weight in gold!" She: "No, John—I cannot marry any man who doesn't think me worth my weight in radium!"

The Only One Appreciated.

"Madge," said her father, "William asked me for your hand last night, and I consented." "Well, papa, that's the first bill of mine you haven't objected to."

Quite True.

"Don't talk to me," said the lettuce to the turnip; "I have a heart, and you haven't." "I don't see how that can be," replied the turnip, "you never get mashed, and I do."

He Blamed the Cook.

Young Wife (at dinner): "I didn't tell you, Adolphus, I cooked the dinner to-day myself." Husband: "Indeed! Then in my thoughts I have been doing poor Mary Ann a great injustice!"

He was Not so Backward as He Looked.

Ethel (who thinks her country cousin bashful): "Can't you find anything better to squeeze than a felt hat?" Country Cousin: "Wait a bit. I'm only reducin' my energy for fear I might hurt you."

Like Father Like Son.

Stern Father: "What an unearthly hour that fellow stops till every night, Dora! What does your mother say about it?" Daughter: "She says men haven't altered a bit since she was young, pa."

How Comforting!

She: "And you don't find it tiresome, dear, with me? You are sure you don't want to go back to your bachelor life again?" He: "Quite, my darling; indeed, married life is so awfully jolly that if you were to die to-night, I'd get married again to-morrow!"

They're Always at It.

Mrs. Widgers: "Indeed! If you knew half as much as you *think* you know, you'd know half as much again as you do know." Mr. Widgers: "Thank you! And if you knew twice as much as you *don't* know, you'd know three times as much as there is to know!"

He Still Keeps His Opinion.

Young Wife (sobbing): "I will not keep still! Before we were married you said I had a charming flow of language." Young Husband: "And so you have, dear. It not only flows, but dashes, leaps, bounds, roars, goes over cataracts and mill-sluices and there is an occasional water-spout as well."

They are Supposed to be Perfect.

He: "So the engagement is broken off?" She: "Yes. He told her he thought she should stop reading novels and read something more substantial, something that would improve her mind." He: "Well?" She: "Well, the idea of a man intimating to his *fiancée* that she could be improved in any way!"

She was Shocked.

Angelina: "What does the motto on the ring you gave me mean?" Edwin: "'Faithful to the last.'" Angelina: "Monstrous! I thought I was the first!"

Very Much Better.

Gladys: "I was so happy over Fred's letter. I fairly hugged myself." May: "Well, I was happier than you. Reggie called on me, and he did the hugging."

The Hint Direct.

"Would you mind pinning a flower in my coat when I go?" asked young De Borem. "Certainly not," replied Miss Wearyun. "It will afford me pleasure to do it at once."

Both Had Their Hopes.

Malcolm: "After we are married, Marie, you must never hesitate to ask me when you want money." Marie: "No, indeed, Malcolm; and I hope you will never hesitate about giving it to me."

A Successful Wooing.

"How many stars can you see?" she asked. "Two more than you," said he. "How do you make that out?" she asked. "*I* can see your eyes," said he. And that was the beginning of it all.

A Pleasant Outlook.

Newly-Made Bride: "Mamma says she does not think we will ever quarrel as she and papa do." Groom: "Never, dearest?" Newly-Made Bride: "No; she says you will be much easier to manage than papa was."

Jack Would Like the Favours.

Mabel: "Don't you think Fido is awfully clever?" Jack: "No, I do not." Mabel: "You horrid thing! Why don't you think so?" Jack: "Because he tries to get away when you kiss him. No intelligent being would do that. Just try it on me once."

Overheard at Brighton.

Harry: "Did you notice that lovely girl? What glorious eyes, with an expression like that of a startled fawn." Old Hand (calmly): "If she has that look she's from London." Harry: "Why?" Old Hand: "You see, all the girls there are that way. Dodging 'buses and cabs, you know!"

A Handy Name.

"I hear you are engaged again. What is the name of the fortunate young lady?" "Her name is Lucinda. That's one reason why I engaged myself to her." "Because her name is Lucinda?" "Just so. You see, that's the name of two former sweethearts of mine, and I can use on this present Lucinda the sonnets I used to my previous Lucindas. She is the most convenient *fiancée* I've had in the last ten years."

A Well-Merited Retort.

Monocle Cadsby (doing his celebrated act of fascination, and speaking to a young lady unescorted): "I think—ah——I have met you before, ah. Glad to see you; might I have the pleasure of accompanying you in your walk?" Young Lady (looking the thing in men's clothes up and down): "I think so, provided you walk about fifteen paces behind, in livery; that is, of course, if the character from your last place is satisfactory."

Verdict of Not Guilty.

"Do you mean to swear," said the foreman of the jury to the witness, "that at the time of the quarrel that constitutes the cause of this action, you saw the prisoner with a coal-scuttle in his hands, making ready to heave it at his wife?" "Not exactly," said the witness, with considerable hesitation. "I mean to swear that I saw the prisoner with a coal-scuttle in his hands." "In what attitude was he then?" asked the presiding judge. "Well, now, since your lordship has asked, I'll tell the truth. The prisoner was lying down with the coal-scuttle over his head, and his wife on the top of it."

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Reunited at Last.

A Touching Story of Poverty and Kindness.

It was Christmas Eve; dark, cold, and wet, the rain driving in torrents round the corners of the streets, where people ran against each other and scowled under their dripping umbrellas as they received the by no means welcome drops from those of their neighbours.

But in Chancery Lane there was not a creature to be seen, save a slight, thinly-clad girl, who was unprotected both against cold and wet, for she had neither cloak nor umbrella—a pale girl with great eyes which had an appealing, wistful expression in them which made the passer-by turn and look at her again, if he were of an artistic mind, recognising the wonderful possibilities which lay in them.

She crept under an archway presently, and stood looking up and down the long, narrow street with its line of tall, grey, grim buildings, wondering what she was to do. There was not a hansom or four-wheeler to be seen, even if she had had the means with which to pay one to take her home; but that was an extravagance of which she hardly thought, for the shillings which lay in her small, well-worn leather purse were few and painfully earned.

Two gentlemen passed her, comfortable-looking City men, with their great-coats well buttoned up to their ears, and sheltered by capacious umbrellas. They were men of middle-age, prosperous, and self-satisfied, hastening home to good dinners, and they had not a thought to give to the poor girl standing under the archway.

"Dear me!" said one, "that young woman will get very wet." And the thought of ill-clad young women in the street, without umbrellas or cloaks, being unpleasant, he hastened onwards.

She must make an effort to reach the Waterloo Bridge Road, the girl resolved mentally, and from there take the omnibus to Kennington, where she lived. So she began to walk forward as bravely as she could.

Suddenly a pleasant voice in her ear made her start.

"May I offer you the shelter of my umbrella?" it said; "you are getting dreadfully wet."

The London girl who works for her living, if she be respectable, has a horror of being accosted in the streets, and regards gentlemen somewhat in the light of natural enemies.

The colour rushed into the girl's pale cheeks, and she glanced up hastily and proudly enough, but the face which met her gaze was so youthful, frank, and kindly in appearance that her suspicions were disarmed.

The owner of this merry, boyish face and pleasant voice was a gentleman undoubtedly. Why had he thought of offering her such a civility?

Looking down at her dress with a sigh, she accepted his offer, not without some embarrassment, and they walked along side by side for a little way, the young man talking pleasantly and courteously, without any approach to that familiarity which she dreaded.

He learnt that she lived in Kennington with a sister, who was very ill, and almost unable to work; while as for herself, she was not so clever, and had less schooling; but she managed to earn a pound a week as a typine, being engaged from nine in the morning till seven at night.

Her companion regarded her with genuine pity and astonishment.

"What!" he said in a horrified tone, "you work ten hours daily for three shillings and fourpence. It seems very little."

The girl stared.

"Some only get from twelve to fifteen shillings a week for the same hours," she said simply. "So that, you see, I am well off."

Their ways now parted.

"How will you get home?" he asked concernedly, looking up and down the wet, dismal street. "I say, you won't get the 'bus just directly, and it does not put you down at your door, you said, so won't you let me lend you my umbrella? We fellows don't mind a little wetting, but you have no cloak or anything, and will get soaked through. Do permit me. It won't inconvenience me in the least."

She paused and hesitated.

It was certainly very wet, and she would be drenched, she knew, but still she could not make up her mind to take it. She declined the proffered loan, and moved away, but the rain beat upon her so fiercely that she paused for a second and looked back.

He saw it, and was at her side in a minute. This time she did not refuse, though she felt half ashamed of herself for yielding; but, after all, creature comforts are very dear to us, and we naturally hate unpleasant or hard things, and accept the smooth when we can get it.

"Here is my card," said the young man, fumbling in his pocket. "But you have not told me your name; would you mind doing so?"

"My name is Frances Montgomery," she answered, looking at him quickly. "Are you not afraid to lend me your umbrella? You do not know who I am. I might not return it to you, you know."

He looked at her and smiled.

"I am not afraid of that," he answered pleasantly, and, raising his hat, walked quickly away.

The girl looked after him with a strange feeling stirring at her heart. She was not accustomed to meet with consideration or kindness in her daily walk; there were few who stopped to think of her. It surprised her that anyone should do so.

But the young man who had stopped to pity and consider her was very young, very impulsive, and very generous. If he had lived a few more years in the world he would probably have passed on like the rest, but youth is strangely indiscreet, strangely warm-hearted sometimes, and he had not learnt caution or discretion yet. Moreover, the girl was young and pleasing to look upon, and he was young likewise, therefore open to impressions.

If she had been old, ugly, and wrinkled, we cannot venture to assert that he would have done precisely the same thing.

When the girl had reached the narrow, dingy street in Kennington where she and her sister lived, she rang the bell quickly, and ran up the steps with more alacrity than she was wont to do.

The tall, thin, sharp-featured woman who opened the door and took the umbrella from her hand eyed it somewhat sharply. It was a large silk one of excellent quality, and the handle was handsomely mounted with silver.

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"Lawk-a-day, Miss Frances!" she remarked with a grim smile. "Where did this 'ere fine piece o' goods come from, I'd like to know?"

"It was lent me," the girl answered, blushing guiltily.

The woman shook her head gravely.

"Look here, miss," she said, catching hold of Frances' arm. "Don't go for to take up with any smooth-spoken gentleman as wants to keep company with you in the streets. There's no good as ever comes of it, my dear, and for the sake of the darling upstairs I wouldn't have no harm come to you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hogg," Frances answered somewhat coldly. "I think I can take care of myself."

"There now, I didn't want to offend you," the landlady said kindly. "But, you see, you're pretty, my love; and it's always the pretty ones as gets tempted; and this is a wicked, cruel world, as you'll find to your sorrow when you've lived a few years more in it."

"Are you very wet, Frances?" asked a faint voice, as the girl opened the door of a small room which served its occupants both as bed and sitting room. "I have been so anxious about you, my dear."

The speaker was a thin, wasted-looking girl, with hollow cheeks and big eyes, with that dull, patient look in them peculiar to those who suffer continually. She sat up in bed working at a gay, plush smoking-cap, which she was bordering with forget-me-nots in silk, and her fingers were so slender that their appearance was almost skeleton-like.

"How are you, Maggie?" Frances asked, bending to kiss her.

"Not much better, I am afraid," sighed the invalid, working on. "You don't know how tired I am, and perhaps, after all, they may not take this."

She held up her work as she spoke, and surveyed it with mournful regret.

"What will they give you for it?" demanded her sister abruptly, hanging up her hat on a peg behind the door.

"Five shillings if they take it," Maggie replied slowly. "And I have been four days working at it. I can't work as well as I used to, I am so easily tired, you know."

Frances sighed heavily, and made no answer.

"Were the shops very gay for Christmas?" asked the invalid presently. "Did you see many pretty things, Frances?"

They talked on quietly while they ate the meal which was both tea and supper, and consisted of toast and weak tea. The elder girl went back to earlier and happier days of which she had still some vague remembrance, and told of Christmas as she had known it long ago.

"I wonder," she said, looking somewhat dreamily into the fire, "if our brother is dead. You know we had a brother when dear papa was alive, Frances—a step-brother, I mean, who went away to America when you were a baby. I don't remember very clearly, because I was only a little girl at the time, but I think someone told me—it may have been Aunt Mary—that papa had to pay away a great deal of money for him, and so became quite poor. It may not be true, though."

"If he did," responded Frances hotly, "our brother, if he were alive, ought to find us out and try to help us. But perhaps he is dead, or rich, and has forgotten all about us. You see we are only his half-sisters, and rich people hate their poor relations."

She laughed half-scornfully, half defiantly.

"My dear," said her sister gently, "you must not say so. They do not know how much the poor suffer. They have so much that they cannot understand our sufferings and struggles—that is all."

"We won't say any more about it," cried Frances. "Tell me about the Select Academy."

This was their favourite theme of conversation, and one on which the invalid was never tired of discoursing.

For five years during her father's lifetime, she had attended daily a select academy for young ladies in St. John's Wood, and the remembrance of that faded gentility had never left her.

There she had learnt to paint flowers, draw unnatural heads and fanciful landscapes, play the piano, sing, and dance, and had picked up some superficial smattering of French, German, and Italian. It was a poor enough school, but she had been abundantly satisfied with it; and the oily-headed professors, with their shabby coats, tall hats, and sweeping bows, filled her soul with delight. It is wonderful to think that five years of such schooling had only enabled the possessor of such unexceptional advantages to go out as a daily governness in a like academy of indisputable selectness, for the large sum of thirty pounds a year. She had a younger sister to care for; and a pinching struggle with narrow means, together with false economy in essentials, had broken down the poor girl's health, so that she was reduced to earn what trifle she could by fancy-work and sewing, badly-enough paid. The aunt who had taken them after their father's death had been poor herself, and had now been dead several years, leaving them entirely dependent on their own exertions.

They had scarcely finished their meal when the door opened, and in bounced the landlady, flourishing the umbrella.

"I wouldn't be worrying you for nothing, Miss Montgomery, bless your heart!" she cried indignantly. "But when a young woman comes home with the likes of this," surveying the silver-mounted handle with contempt, "given to her or lent by goodness knows who, it's time someone should speak. P'raps Miss Frances has told you about it herself, though."

The invalid turned a sad, reproachful glance upon her sister, who sank down at her bedside, crying:

"Don't look like that, Maggie. I'll tell you all about it, dear. Don't you believe me?"

She poured out her story breathlessly and incoherently enough, and drew out the card the gentleman had given her as a corroboration.

Maggie took it in her hand and read it slowly: "Frederic Delany, 18 Cavendish Square, W." Then she took the umbrella into her hand and looked at it doubtfully.

"My dear," she said gently, laying her thin hand on her sister's, "this is a gentleman—a grand gentleman, perhaps. You ought not to speak to gentlemen in the streets. Promise me you will never do it again, for when I am gone I want you to remember always that if you are only a typine and work for your living, you are also a lady—that our father was a gentleman, and you must do nothing he would be ashamed to think of his daughter doing."

She could say no more, for Frances burst out sobbing, and clung round her neck in a passion of tears.

* * * * *

In the large and handsomely-furnished dining-room at No. 18 Cavendish Square, Frederick Delany sat at dinner.

Extremely youthful in appearance and even boyish in manner, he presented a striking contrast to his *vis-à-vis*, a tall, dark man of marked appearance, whose face was unusually serious, and his hair slightly silvered. No one knew very much about him, but he had a curious charm of manner underlying a certain reservedness and austerity, which made him a favourite in Society, and he was reputed to be enormously rich—a fact which, after all, was probably the more attractive of the two. He was unmarried—another reason for his popularity—and rented a small but elegantly-furnished house in Green Street, bordering on Park Lane. Some nine or ten years ago he had suddenly appeared in London—come home from America, he said—and had settled down quietly. He appeared to have no relations, and what he had done in America nobody inquired, since, probably, nobody very greatly cared. Some people, whom Society believed in, took him up, and the rest obediently followed their example. Report said he was secretly in love with the eldest Miss Delany. Be that as it may, he was frequently to be found at their pleasant house in Cavendish Square.

"You surely did not go out without your umbrella to-day, Fred?" said Miss Delany during dinner, turning to her brother. "I saw you come in without it, did I not?"

"No," he answered, blushing. "I did not forget it, but I—I lent it."

"Indeed!" said his father, smiling at the young man's embarrassment. "And to whom did you lend it?"

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"To—to a young lady," he replied, stammering, and looking slightly confused. "At least, she looked and spoke like one, though she said she was a typine, and worked ten hours a day for a pound a week."

"Dear me!" murmured his mother, in tones of geniune pity. "How does she manage to live? What was her name? Did you ask?"

"Curiously enough," Frederick replied, looking at his friend across the table, "her name was the same as Will's—Montgomery—Frances Montgomery. She has an invalid sister—Maggie, I think her name is—who is almost unable to work, and they live at Kennington."

A long, silent chord in Will Montgomery's memory was evidently touched by this statement. The expression of his face was painfully, intensely eager as he leant across the table, and, looking the younger man straight in the face, gasped out:

"Tell me about this girl—tell me again."

Briefly Frederick related what he knew of her, speaking with much pity of her poor and inadequate clothing, and dwelling upon her refinement of manner and bearing.

"Listen," said Mr. Montgomery, in a low voice of suppressed emotion, when he had finished. "I have something to tell you. Years ago there was a young man who was both wicked and extravagant. He ran into many excesses, and incurred heavy liabilities which he was utterly unable to meet. His father, who could not bear that his name should be disgraced, paid those liabilities to the amount of ten thousand pounds, and, thereby, from having been a comparatively rich man, became a poor one. The young man then went abroad to begin his life over again in a new world, leaving his father and two little half-sisters behind. He worked early and late to amass money and redeem the past. During those years of engrossing toil he learnt that his father was dead. He also heard that his half-sisters had been taken by an aunt, but of them he thought little, and gradually almost forgot their existence. When he returned to England, a young man no longer, he made one or two inquiries after the aunt with whom they had gone to live, but could hear nothing of her. He then, in the pleasures and cares of his daily life, thought no more of his sisters, and gave himself up to the enjoyment of the wealth which he had so hardly won. What do you think such a man deserves?"

There was a silence.

Then Miss Delany spoke.

"He ought," she said, leaning forward, and looking gravely at Mr. Montgomery, "to go to his sisters, and not be ashamed to confess how grievously he has sinned in neglecting them, and beg their forgiveness if they have suffered through his so doing."

"I am the man," he said solemnly. "This poor girl whom your brother met to-day is my half sister—my father's child. Her name, I remember, was Frances. Frances was the younger, and Maggie the elder. God only knows the cruel want these poor girls have suffered all these years while I have lived in ease and luxury. I ought to have made every effort to find them out, for the sake of their father and mine. But it is not too late to repair my fault. I will do as you say, and they shall never know want any more."

When he left Cavendish Square, Mr. Delany, senior, remarked:

"I never liked the fellow so well as I did to-night, wife. He has good stuff in him."

Christmas morning dawned bright and clear, and at an early hour Mr. Montgomery hastened to Kennington to the address which Frederick Delany had given him, to find his long-lost sisters.

As he stood at the door of the small and dingy lodging-house they inhabited, and knocked, a burning blush mounted his brow as he thought of the want and poverty which he could so easily have relieved had he known it.

The landlady eyed him questioningly, and on his inquiry for Miss Montgomery, replied tartly:

"You ain't a-goin' to see her, sir. She've been took very bad in the night, and lies dyin' upstairs as anyone may see must have been the end of her sufferings, poor dear thing, as come on all along o'wearing bad boots as didn't ought to have been on a young lady's feet, but there weren't the money to buy a new pair with, bless her! And who may be you as comes axin' after Miss Montgomery, and what right have you to come intrudin' at a time like this?" she demanded somewhat fiercely.

"The best of rights," he answered quietly. "I am her brother."

Mrs. Hogg stared, ejaculated, and murmuring profuse apologies, conducted him upstairs.

The sight of the wretched room, with its miserable furniture, so shabby and so poor, cut him to the heart.

Maggie lay back in bed, her face as white as death, her eyes half-closed, while her breath came gaspingly as if she were in pain. By her side knelt Frances, her arms clasped round her sister in the very attitude of despair. A tiny fire flickered in the grate; there was nothing in the room save the bare necessities of life, and a few worn volumes on a shelf above the dying girl's bed; everything proclaimed the children of poverty.

A lump rose in Mr. Montgomery's throat, and he could not speak for a moment.

Frances turned her head, and, seeing a stranger, an exclamation of surprise broke from her lips.

The dying girl opened her eyes.

Mr. Montgomery stepped forward, and took her hand.

"I am your brother," he said slowly and distinctly, bending over the bed that she might catch every word; "I have cruelly neglected you. Can you ever forgive me for having left you in want so long?"

She seemed scarcely surprised, and a little wandering in her mind.

"We *had* a brother," she murmured. "Did I not tell you so, Frances? Aunt Mary told me a long time ago. We were very little when he went away, and so he forgot us—that is all."

She sighed.

"When he comes back—if he is alive and remembers—he will take care of you, Frances, my dear; but—— It is very cold."

She shivered, sighed, and, turning her head, went out for ever from the world's coldness and pain.

Frances, in an abandonment of grief, threw herself face downwards on the bed, but she could not weep, her sorrow was too great.

"Little sister," said her brother, gently raising her, "I have only you, and you have only me now. God helping me, I will do my best to make up to you for what you have lost; and I would give half of what I have to bring her back to life and health if I could."

He looked sadly at the dead girl as he spoke.

"Poor Maggie!" murmured Frances, and fell sobbing on his breast.

A year later, Fred Delany, the good Samaritan, and Frances Montgomery, the lady typine, were quietly married.

W. Hills.

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SYLVIA.

Telling How a Girl was Misjudged.

It was a calm summer evening, but a faint breeze was blowing; very pleasant after the great heat of the day. So thought two young men as they sauntered to and fro on the promenade of a fashionable watering-place. In the distance they heard the not unmusical strain of the town band.

"That is rather a pretty thing they are playing," remarked one of the men, Frank Leslie, referring to the band; "what is it called?"

"I believe it is a gavotte, called 'Sylvia,'" replied Stuart Harcourt, his companion.

What a host of bitter, sweet memories surged through Frank's mind at the mention of that name. He saw a winsome, merry face, framed in glorious masses of bright, brown hair; soft, violet eyes that had so often gazed at him with a tender lovelight shining in them. A long sigh broke from him, which caused his friend to turn to him and say:

"What is it, Leslie, old chap? Anything the matter? By-the-by, Sylvia is the name you were always shouting out when you had brain fever so badly in India. Is there anything connected with it?"

A pause ensued, during which time Frank Leslie seemed to be engaged in a mental struggle. At last he exclaimed:

"You have been a good friend to me, Stuart, and nursed me like a brother when I had the fever, so I will tell you what I would impart to no other person living, that is, my love story. Light a cigarette, old fellow, let us sit down on this bench, and here goes:

"When I was quartered at Marford, a horrid little country town, I made the acquaintance of Mr. Barns, vicar of the country parish of Wartham. He was very kind, and invited me to his house. I went, and met his daughter, Sylvia Barns. Oh, Stuart! I can never tell you how I loved that girl, and fully did I believe she loved me in return. I was always looking for opportunities to go to Wartham Vicarage, until Mark Barns, her brother, came home from Oxford, and it was comparatively easy, for he and I became inseparable companions. At last the day came when I received my orders for India. I went straight to Wartham, saw Sylvia, told her of my love, and asked if there was any hope for me?

"'I have never cared for anyone save you, Frank, and never shall.'"

"Those were her very words, Harcourt, but how false they proved! I then went to Mr. Barns, to tell him of what had taken place between his daughter and myself.

"'You are both too poor to be married,' he replied. 'I don't approve of long engagements, but if you both think the same when you come home, Leslie, I will give my sanction to the marriage. If in the meantime either of you should change your mind, write and apprise the other of the fact, but no other correspondence will I allow; in this I trust to your honour.'

"Not being able to make better terms than this, I consented.

"I had been in India about a year, when I received a note in Sylvia's handwriting, which ran as follows:

"'I have changed my name to Durnford;' and by the same mail a newspaper arrived, on opening which, my eye caught a paragraph commencing thus:

"'*The little village of Wartham was en fête on Tuesday, on the occasion of the marriage of Mr. Durnford with Miss Barns.*'

"I read no further. It was indeed insult added to injury. Not only had Sylvia proved false in the little space of time, but she had also sent me a newspaper account of her baseness. You know the rest. How I got brain fever, and how on my recovery we both obtained leave and came home."

* * * * *

A few evenings after Frank's confession, he and Stuart attended the Infirmary ball. Whilst walking round the room criticising different belles, Stuart's attention was suddenly attracted by an exceedingly pretty girl, who was gazing at his friend with earnest attention. He saw Frank glance at her with a look of sudden scorn, then the fair face paled, and she shrank behind a lady who was standing near. Later in the evening, Frank, who had not danced many times, was accosted by one of the stewards whom he knew slightly.

"There is a lady friend of mine here who hardly knows anybody, so do come and dance with her."

So saying, he took Frank's arm, led him up to a group near the door, murmured a few indistinct words of introduction, and hurried away to another non-dancing man, leaving Frank face to face with his false love, Sylvia Barns.

"Why have you not spoken to me all the evening?" she asked in an appealing voice. "What have I done to offend you?"

"Need you ask," replied Frank sternly; "when you think of your treachery and baseness."

"Treachery and baseness!" Sylvia faltered. "Frank, I I don't understand you."

"This is no place for a discussion; come into the conservatory," said Frank.

The conservatory was empty. On arriving there Frank turned to Sylvia, and said in a scornful tone:

"You don't understand, Mrs. Durnford, what I mean by treachery? Do you not call promising to marry one man and then jilting him for another, base?"

"Yes, Frank, I should call it so; but what has it to do with me? And why do you call me Mrs. Durnford? I am Miss Durnford!"

"Miss Durnford!" ejaculated Frank, in amazement. "How so?"

"Why, poor old Aunt Durnford died when you had been away a year, leaving us her money, providing we should take her surname. Did you not receive the paper with an account of Mark's wedding in it, which beautifully explained it all? My father said I wasn't to write a letter. I wrote a note, though, letting you know of my change of name."

A light flashed across Frank's mind.

"Then it was Mark who was married, and of course, I remember, he always was in love with his cousin, Bessie Barns. Oh, my darling, my darling, can you ever forgive me for doubting you?" murmured Frank passionately, when he had explained his fears.

What Sylvia answered I know not; suffice it to say that the little village of Wartham was again *en fête* shortly afterwards, on the occasion of Miss Durnford's marriage with Captain Leslie of the Royal Heavies.

May Harvey.

HANDWRITING DENOTES YOUR CHARACTER,
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POWERFUL ROMANCE.

A CRIMINAL MILLIONAIRE

By GEORGE GRIFFITH.

Author of "The Angel of the Revolution," "Olga Romanoff," "The Lake of Gold," etc., etc.

THIRTIETH CHAPTER.

The Doom of a Traitor.

"Look here, Staunton, what sort of a game is this you are playing on us? I'm talking business, strict business understand, and there's my pile on the table. Don't let us misunderstand one another."

"Yes, and there's mine, and now what have you got to say?"

It was four o'clock of the morning after the concert, and Derrick Kesteven and Isolo Staunton stood facing each other from opposite sides of the table in the Council Chamber. Kesteven had taken a five-chambered .38 Smith and Wesson out of his hip-pocket and laid it on the table in front of him, and Staunton had answered the challenge by doing the same.

As though by tacit consent they put their hands behind their backs and looked at each other eye to eye across the table. Each knew perfectly well that if he put a hand out towards his weapon he would be shot the next moment.

"Can't you see what it means? Surely you know enough of what you and I have been working through together for the last fifteen years or so——

"Look here, Staunton, you just remember what I told you after your talk here with those Spaniards. This is no funeral of mine. I resigned right then and I want to know how it happens that we started out from the Bay of Nice last evening for a sort of *al fresco* sea-concert-picnic business, and some of us who didn't want to go to sleep after what happened, find ourselves out of sight of land on board this craft of yours ripping through the water faster than a destroyer. Where are we?"

Staunton took out his watch and looked at it for about half a minute.

"I should say that we cleared the Straits of Gibraltar about an hour ago, and we are now heading about South-West—well, we will say, across the Atlantic."

"And our destination?"

"Is at present undecided."

"In other words, you've somehow fixed the thing up so that you've enticed the whole lot of us on board this infernal craft of yours to dine and have a concert and so on, and you think that you've got the whole lot of us, not only our own personal friends, but your guests as well, absolutely at your mercy. That's so, isn't it?"

"My dear Kesteven," replied Staunton, pulling a chair up to the table and sitting down well within reach of his revolver, "you have hit off the situation to perfection. Just take up your gun and put it in your pocket, and let us talk like reasonable beings. Put yours away first. Shoot me if you like, and if you want everybody on board to find trouble. As it is I am standing right on the sharp edge of eternity, and one way or another it doesn't, after all, matter very much. Just a few years more or less, that's all."

"You're grit, Solly. Grit right through, darn you," replied Kesteven, in just the same voice in which he had spoken; nearly fifteen years before, on the verandah of the house in San Francisco, when they had shaken hands over their partnership.

He took up his pistol and balanced it for a moment in his hand. Staunton, sitting back in his chair, with his hands in his trousers pockets, looked at him eye to eye, and said:

"Well, if you mean business, why don't you shoot?"

"No!" said Kesteven, putting his pistol back in his pocket and sitting down. "Let it go at that. I know a stronger man than myself when I see him, and we've both got daughters on board this hooker of yours. Now, suppose you shoot."

"Not much," laughed Staunton, throwing his own revolver across the table. "This isn't a sort of time for dog to eat dog anyhow."

It was curious how these two men, multi-millionaires both of them, with the world at their feet like a football, reverted, in this supreme hour of conflict, to the old poker language of the days when they were both adventurers, with only a few thousand dollars between themselves and poverty—or prison.

"O. K.," said Kesteven, throwing Staunton's revolver back across the table. "We'll play the cards face up. And now I suppose I can call the game. What is it?"

"It's a longish story," said Staunton. "You see, it's this way. We'll count you out of the business, as you wanted to be, but I'm in it right up to the ears. I made a bad mistake getting here so quickly—not myself, I mean, but the yacht, after leaving Leith and going to the anchorage."

"Yes," interrupted Kesteven, "but who in thunder could have known that except yourself and the skipper?"

"My dear Derrick, it seems to me as if you'd been seeing nothing since you shut down on the partnership. You were talking to me the other day about our friend Mr. Dennison and his colleague Mr. Smith. Well, do you happen to know who Mr. Smith is?"

"Eh, Smith, well I guess he's just Mr. Smith, chief of the International Police in London. Anything more?"

"Yes," replied Staunton, taking a sip at his whisky and soda, "Mr. Smith is also the Monsieur de Ronski, who——"

"What do you say!" exclaimed Kesteven, jumping to his feet. "What, that man and his wife and his daughter, that lovely girl, that incomparable singer? Look here, Solly, are you really sure of this?"

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"We've been through a few pretty tight places, Derrick, since you and I started to work together," replied Staunton, also getting up, "but this is about the tightest that I ever tried to get through, and if you'll sit down for a minute I'll just show you how I mean to do it if the Fates won't look sideways on me. You'd hardly think that we had a traitor on board this boat would you, a man that we both trusted rather too much or too little, maybe too little perhaps?"

"What, not Valdez?" exclaimed Kesteven.

"No, no," replied Staunton, "he has his limitations, and he makes his mistakes, as he did with young Ellerton, and made all this trouble with poor Mercedes, but there's nothing of the traitor about him. I'll introduce you to the traitor in a minute or two, and then you shall see."

'Yes," said Kesteven, as he emptied his glass. "Of course, if it's a case of treason, I don't want you to tell me what's necessary. Heave ahead! I'm with you there. You won't hurt my feelings."

"I thought not," laughed Staunton, going to the telephone and taking the transmitter down.

"Have you got him there? Yes. Very well. Send him here at once. Put him in the sleeping bag, and don't let anyone see him. Have you got everything arranged below? Very well. That will do. Send him aft."

Staunton hung up the transmitter and opened the double door.

"Say, what in thunder are you doing, Staunton? Is there going to be any murder and sudden death about this business?"

"Murder? No!" replied Staunton quietly. "Sudden death? Probably. In short, if you wish to see it, you can assist at an execution, but anyhow it's going to take place within the next ten minutes."

"Well," replied Kesteven, "taking your word for it that it is a traitor, I reckon I'm with you. Bring him right along."

The telephone bell tinkled again, and the next moment a couple of stalwart quarter-masters came in, carrying a long, shapeless bundle between them.

"Put it down," said Staunton, "and go forward and tell Mr. Darfield that I should be glad if he would come here."

The men laid their burden on the floor, touched their caps, and went out without a word. Staunton closed the doors and came back and touched the bundle, inside which something was moving, with his foot, and said:

"This is it. What do you think it is?"

"It looks something like a man," said Kesteven slowly, and then suddenly he continued more anxiously, "look here, Solly, don't prolong the agony, it isn't a woman, is it?"

A smothered groan came from within the sleeping bag. Staunton leant down and unbuttoned the flap. "Take hold of that end, Derrick."

Kesteven took hold of the bottom of the bag with both hands. There was another shuddering movement inside it and he heard another gasping moan. Then Staunton put his hand in, and, with a wrench, dragged out Doctor Billaud, grey-white with fear, his eyes rolling in their sockets. His lower jaw was working convulsively, rattling his teeth together, his hands were clenched, and his legs were trembling and knocking against each other.

"Stand up, you dirty traitor, stand up and tell us what you think of yourself. Confound you!"

It was not often that Isolo Staunton let the savage that was in him loose, but it was loose now. He took Billaud by the jaw and the back of his head and lifted him up as though he had been a child. Then he let him go, and Billaud dropped into a huddled heap on the floor, gasping out between his sobs:

"What? Mercy for a thing like you," laughed Staunton, rolling him over with his foot, "look at it, Derrick. That's the sort of thing that thought it could give us away. What do you think of it?"

"Looks very mean, anyhow," said Kesteven, somewhat uneasily, for he had never seen anything quite so terrible as his late partner was now, vibrating in every nerve with strongly suppressed passion.

"What are you going to do with it?"

"You'll see soon," said Staunton shortly, and then the telephone bell tinkled twice. He opened the doors again and the first officer came in, pale, but quite steady and self-possessed. He knew already the part that he was going to be called upon to play. Billaud's life was nothing to him in comparison with the work which he had set himself to do. He had had a long talk with Janet in her own room after the concert and she had given him enough of her strength to enable him to bear himself like a man.

"Mr. Darfield," said Staunton, touching Billaud's shuddering body with his foot again, "it seems that our friend the doctor has been foolish enough to feel jealous because he has not been allowed to learn quite all about the inner workings of the *Isola*, and so he has thought fit to take a stupid, womanish sort of revenge by trying to betray me and therefore, of course, all of those who work with me to the police.

"Therefore, I have decided to reward his zeal in the cause of law and order by admitting him to a full knowledge of the secrets which he seems to have been so anxious to learn. Is everything ready below?"

"Yes, sir," replied Darfield, "everything."

"Very well, then," said Staunton, "then we can initiate our friend at once."

Billaud moaned again inarticulately, dragged himself to his knees, clasped his hands, and then rolled forward at Staunton's feet and tried to put his arms round his legs, sobbing again:

"Mercy, mercy, sir; have pity, have pity. I have sinned but I will atone. Do not kill me now, I am not fit to die; pity, pity!"

Staunton lifted his foot and kicked him away.

"Pity for a thing like you," he laughed; "a thing that doesn't even think itself fit to die. Really, my dear doctor, that is nothing whatever to do with me. You should have thought of that before. As it is, I am afraid you will have to arrange that little difficulty as best you can in the next world. You won't have time to do it in this one."

Billaud uttered another gasping moan and dropped prone, his forehead hitting the carpet with a soft sound, which to Kesteven's ears had something sickening in it.

"The man's fainted," he said roughly. "Say, I don't see any particular sport in this. I know you can't let him live, but don't play with the poor fellow like that. You're a man, not a cat."

His tone of disgust rather than his words cooled Staunton's frenzy of revenge. He shrugged his shoulders and said half apologetically:

"Well, perhaps you're right; the thing isn't worth playing with."

He took the brandy decanter and poured out half a glass, straightened Billaud out, lifted his head, and poured some into his mouth. He shuddered and gasped and opened his eyes.

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"Ah, where am I? What has happened? Ah, yes, yes, I remember. God help me! I am lost!"

"Not quite, my friend, but you soon will be," laughed Staunton, picking him up by the shoulders and dropping him on to a chair. "Just oblige me by tieing him up, Mr. Darfield, in case he falls down again and hurts himself. You will find a bit of line there on the sofa. I thought we might want it."

Darfield picked up a little coil of thin rope from the sofa, and in a couple of minutes had fastened the shrinking, trembling form of the doomed man to the chair. Meanwhile Staunton had pulled the corner of the carpet aside and tapped four times on the floor with the toe of his boot. Three taps answered him from below. He went to the chair and said to Darfield:

"Give me a hand."

They lifted the chair and placed it on the square in the corner, and as they did so Billaud recovered sense enough from his paralysis of fear to remember how he had helped to put Wilfrid Ellerton in the same position after he had administered the drug to him.

"Come along, Kesteven," said Staunton, "and you, too, Mr. Darfield."

He went and stood behind the huge chair. Two others took their places on either side. Billaud's head dropped forward and a gasping sob gurgled in his throat. Staunton tapped with his toe again and the platform sank. It came to rest on the floor of the lower chamber.

"Come, now, rouse up, doctor," said Staunton, with a savage laugh, as he caught his chin and turned his face up. "If you want to have just another look about you, this is the time to do it."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake put the man out of his misery and be done with it," exclaimed Kesteven, with a gesture of disgust. "I didn't think you were as mean as that, Solly. Get it over. Just think what Mer——"

The next instant he was looking into the muzzle of Staunton's revolver.

"Another syllable and by all that's holy you'll go down with him."

"Then I guess Mr. Darfield might as well put us away together," replied Kesteven quietly.

Staunton looked down and saw the barrel of his partner's pistol pointing straight at his heart.

"I've seen you, Solly, and I guess the hands are about even. I've got fours and one over and so have you. All the same I was wrong and I apologise."

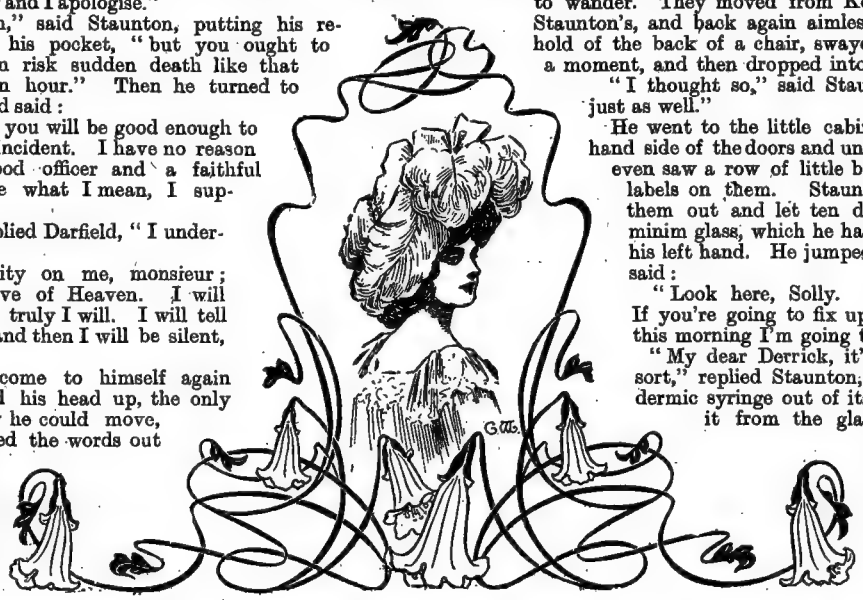
"Good enough," said Staunton, putting his revolver back into his pocket, "but you ought to know better than risk sudden death like that twice in half an hour." Then he turned to his first officer and said:

"Mr. Darfield, you will be good enough to forget this little incident. I have no reason for losing a good officer and a faithful servant—you see what I mean, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir," replied Darfield, "I understand you."

"Ah, pity, pity on me, monsieur; pity for the love of Heaven. I will be faithful again, truly I will. I will tell you everything, and then I will be silent, indeed I will."

Billaud had come to himself again and straightened his head up, the only part of his body he could move, and as he gasped the words out he looked at him with a glance which even Staunton did not wish to see again.



He turned away without making any reply and touched the button in the end wall of the chamber. The steel panel fell back, disclosing the sloping passage down which Ellerton had been carried on his way to the Underworld. At the end was the diving chamber with the electric bulb shining in the roof.

"Lend a hand, Mr. Darfield," said Staunton, taking hold of the back of the chair. "This is part of the secret the doctor wanted to learn, and he'll learn a bigger one very soon."

They lifted the chair and carried Billaud whimpering hopeless, half-inarticulate pleas for mercy, down the passage and planted the chair in the middle of the diving chamber.

"Thank you, Mr. Darfield, that will do; I don't want you to have any more share in this business than you've got to have. I'll do the rest."

"Thank you, sir," replied the first officer, with a very evident note of relief in his voice. He went out into the passage and Staunton, apparently deaf to the hardly human cries which came sobbing and gasping from his victim's lips, took up a coil of rope lying on the floor of the chamber beside a couple of fifty kilogramme weights, and lashed it round his body and framework of the chair. Then he laughed again:

"Good-bye, doctor, see you in the next world perhaps," and followed Darfield into the passage.

He took hold of one of the levers on the wall.

A hoarse scream of despairing agony burst from Billaud's white and trembling lips, and the next moment the sheet of steel slid down and quenched it into silence.

Staunton pulled the second lever.

There was a faint gurgling sound of inrushing water. He pulled out his watch and counted a hundred and twenty seconds, then he pushed back the second lever and then a minute later the first. The sheet of steel rose again, and Kesteven, who had come half way down the sloping passage, looked into the chamber. It was drenched with water and empty.

THIRTY-FIRST CHAPTER.

Plans for the Future.

Kesteven had seen as much as most men have done but when he and Staunton and Darfield found themselves back in the Council Chamber, and Staunton had kicked the corner of the carpet over the sinking platform, he went to the table and took hold of the brandy decanter.

Darfield's face was grey-white and his eyes were beginning to wander. They moved from Kesteven's face to Staunton's, and back again aimlessly. He caught hold of the back of a chair, swayed to and fro for a moment, and then dropped into it.

"I thought so," said Staunton, "and it's just as well."

He went to the little cabinet on the left-hand side of the doors and unlocked it. Kesteven saw a row of little bottles, with blue labels on them. Staunton took one of them out and let ten drops fall into a minim glass, which he had taken up with his left hand. He jumped to his feet, and said:

"Look here, Solly. I'm full of this. If you're going to fix up another funeral this morning I'm going to bed."

"My dear Derrick, it's nothing of the sort," replied Staunton, taking a hypodermic syringe out of its case and filling it from the glass. "Mr. Darfield wants a sedative tonic as he has just said, and if he likes I will give it to him."

"No, sir, I thank you,"

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exclaimed Darfield, getting up. "If you will allow me—if I have done all that you require, I will only ask that you will give me a couple of hours' sleep. Really, sir, that is all I want."

"Are you frightened, Mr. Darfield?" said Staunton, going towards him with the syringe balanced between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. "Surely you don't think that I want to do you any harm—you—look here!"—he went on pulling up his sleeve and running the needle under the skin of his arm. "I want a sedative as you do, and I am not going to commit suicide."

He pressed the piston and the skin puffed up above the puncture. "There is half of it," he said, "will you have the other? I think it will do you good."

"Thank you, sir," said Darfield, pulling up his sleeve. "I would give a good deal for three hours' sleep just now."

"And you shall have it, because you have earned it," said Staunton, gripping him by the wrist and thrusting the needle into the flesh of his forearm. He pressed the piston until the last drop of the drug had gone in. He took the needle out, opened the doors, and said:

"Now, the sooner you get to bed the better, and it will be as well for you to forget everything that has happened to-night."

"Yes, sir, I will forget everything except what you have just said," replied Darfield, as he stepped haltingly over the combing of the doorway and disappeared into the grey mingling of the dying night and the dawning day.

Staunton closed the doors, went to the cabinet, opened a drawer, and took out a lancet, he bared his arm again, and ripped the flesh open where the swelling was still visible. A stream of blood, mingled with a whitish fluid, ran down towards his wrist. He took out his pocket handkerchief and pressed it over the wound.

"Just go to that cabinet, Derrick, will you, and get me the collodion and a bandage. The collodion is on the second shelf to the left hand, and the bandages are in the bottom drawer to the right."

"You are pretty hard shell, Solly. Grit all through," said Kesteven, "and if I could only sympathise with you in that South American scheme of yours, I'd like to help you to be Emperor and make myself your Prime Minister or Chancellor or whatever it is."

"You can do it now, Derrick, if you like," replied Staunton, as Kesteven poured the collodion over the wound and then wrapped the bandage over it.

"Not me, Solly," he replied, shaking his head as he finished the bandage and pinned the end. "I've got Cora to think about, to say nothing about the Grand Duke, and I reckon I should feel pretty mean if she didn't become a Grand Duchess in due course, and, incidentally, I might ask what you might intend doing with the lot of us on board here. I suppose you haven't forgotten you have about forty people on board this boat who will be pretty well astonished when they wake up later on this morning and find themselves skimming over the wide Atlantic at thirty or forty miles an hour, instead of running into moorings in the Bay of Nice. What are you going to do about them?"

"Well," said Staunton, pulling his coat sleeves down, "that is a matter that wants thinking about, isn't it? If you don't mind being partners again for a few hours, Derrick, I think you can help me out of one of the tightest places I have been in for some time, and at the same time go home with all your feathers flying."

"As regards the superfluous guests, I reckon. Is that it?" asked Kesteven, looking at him from under his half-lowered eyelids.

"You've got it in once, as we used to say out West," said Staunton. "You see it's this way, I've got this crowd of people on board, I've had to bring them away, but I don't want them, and I don't wish any evil to them."

"With exceptions, I suppose?" said Kesteven, sitting up and looking hard at him.

"Yes, naturally there are certain exceptions. If there hadn't been the yacht wouldn't be where she is now. A man with all I have to risk doesn't get outside the four corners of the law for nothing."

"And the exceptions?" asked Kesteven.

"Well," said Staunton, poising himself on the edge of the table, "to begin with, there's our mutual friend, Smith—de Ronski. I can't let him go, and his wife and daughter—no, no, don't worry about your gun. I see what you're thinking, and I quite appreciate——"

"Rats, Solly, don't give me any of that stuff. Put it in plain figures, and let's be done with it."

"Exactly what I was going to do, if you hadn't weighed in with that chivalrous interruption," said Staunton, with a sneering laugh running through his words. "It comes to this. For my safety, to say nothing about Mercedes and you and Cora, these people have got to stop on board for the present. You don't want me to tell you what would happen if I landed them at the end of the cable——"

"Do they all know?" Kesteven interrupted, sitting straight up in his chair. In his eyes was a strange gleam.

"If my information is worth anything, my dear Derrick," said Staunton, flicking the ash off his cigar—"his women-folk, charming and all as they are, are rather more dangerous to our interests than Mr. Smith himself. I know pretty well what he knows and what he wants to do, but when you get women taking a hand in a game like this you don't know what to play."

"That's so," said Kesteven. "Quite right. If they're in it with Smith, well charming and all as they are I suppose they've got to take their chance with him. Anyone else? Dennison, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied Staunton slowly, "I think I'll have to prolong his holiday for a few weeks, but if you'll just do what I am going to ask you to do, Derrick, I'll give you my word as one white man to another, that no harm shall come to any of them unless it's absolutely necessary. By that, of course, I mean that none of them shall find trouble unless he or she goes and deliberately looks for it."

"Good enough," replied Kesteven. "I'll take it at that; and now what do you want me to do?"

"Just this," said Staunton, taking out his watch. "If we have been keeping our speed, we shall be within twenty miles of Madeira about an hour after breakfast. The de Ronskis and Mr. Dennison will not appear at breakfast. They will have it in their own rooms if they want it. When breakfast is over the two steam pinnaces will be at your service. You will explain to our guests that it has become impossible for me to take them back to Nice, and they will take a trip with you in the two pinnaces to Funchal, where you will be able to get back to Europe by the first South African liner that comes along. I shall not appear myself, because I hate explanations. When they get back to Southampton they can talk as much as they please. The *Isola* will take a good deal of finding by then."

"And Mercedes and Cora?"

"They will of course go with you, and so will Miss Yuill. I'll have a talk with Mercedes before breakfast. Under all the circumstances it will be for you to hand her, and, of course, Miss Yuill, over to the care of my old friend, José Martinez at Funchal. I'll explain the matter to Miss Yuill.

"She will see that after the shock the poor girl has had with this sudden return of memory, the best thing that could happen to her would be a few weeks of perfect rest and quiet

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in that little paradise which Martinez has up in the mountains.

"I shall tell Miss Yuill that for the present, at least, no disturbing news of any sort must be allowed to reach Mercedes, and I'll give you a letter to Martinez to the same effect. Cora will, of course, go with you and the Grand Duke wherever you like to take her. How does that fit in?"

"Couldn't be better as far as I can see," replied Kesteven, "although it doesn't look as if you'd given me any too little to do. The sort of circus that I'm going to have with Lady Medcalf-Mears and the rest of them, promises to be a bit more exciting than amusing, still I reckon I shall be able to worry through somehow, and as long as I can depend on that promise you've given about Madame de Ronski and Miss Paula, you can depend on me to help you all I can inside the four-square of the law, but you mustn't expect anything outside of it. I have resigned, and you know my reasons for doing it."

"Yes," replied Staunton. "that's so, old man. I'm quite satisfied. I should have done just the same in your place, and if I hadn't set myself to make something more than a few millions—well, well, we won't argue that old question out again. You can trust me anyhow, if it's only for Mercedes' sake. She's my hostage to fortune and to you."

"That's so," said Kesteven, getting up and holding out his hand. "Whatever happens you can trust me to look after her just as if she was Cora's sister."

"Then we'll let it go at that, Derrick, and if I do go under as, of course, may happen, you'll go to my lawyers in London, and they'll hand you over on proof of my death or disappearance a million pounds, which is as clean money as a Quaker might want to handle."

"Good enough, Solly," said Kesteven, and the hands which twice within the last hour had held the threat of sudden death grasped each other, it might be for the last time, in honest faith and friendship.

THIRTY-SECOND CHAPTER.

Proclaimed as President.

It would be impossible to attempt to describe the feelings of the guests of the *Isola* when, after Kesteven had made the necessary explanations at breakfast, they found themselves with their baggage loaded up into two big steam pinnaces running into the Bay of Funchal, watching the white-painted, graceful shape of the *Isola* fading rapidly away into the grey distance to the south-westward, until in an incredibly short space of time it became a white spot of sunlight on the surface of the shimmering sea, and then vanished.

A week later the Union-Castle liner *Saxon* dropped anchor in the bay and picked up the forty astounded and more or less angry passengers.

Three days later the *Saxon* tied up at Ocean Quay, Southampton. On the other side of the Customs' shed there was a special train standing in front of the ordinary boat train. Kesteven had cabled for it from Madeira. It consisted of an engine, two saloon carriages, the baggage waggon, and the guard's van. The late guests of the *Isola*, in common with a good many of their fellow passengers on the *Saxon*, were still of the belief that some serious outrage was in course of perpetration against themselves, but Kesteven, who had taken the Grand Duke and Iddison into his confidence as far as was necessary, managed everything with such infinite tact that they were easily persuaded to take the advantage of the other passengers and get up to London an hour or so before them.

As the big engine, hissing and panting after its seventy-miles spin, pulled up at Waterloo, half-a-dozen newsboys came running along, screaming out:

"United States of South America proclaimed this morning. President Staunton's letter to the Powers. War expected. Here you are, sir. *St. James's, Globe*, or *Westminster?*"

"Well," laughed Kesteven, as he took a handful of papers through the window and threw the boy a shilling, "I reckon that's pretty quick. Our late host hasn't lost much time getting out there and having himself made President, but, anyhow, that will keep for the present. And now, ladies and gentlemen," he went on, taking his hat down from the rack, "you will find the omnibuses ready for your servants and your baggage and carriages for yourselves. Let us dine at the Carlton."

What all London was discussing with wonder was tersely but sufficiently described in the following cable in the *St. James's Gazette*, which Kesteven read aloud to Cora and the Grand Duke and Lady Medcalf-Mears, as they drove along York Road on their way to the Carlton:

"A NEW WORLD POWER.

"The United States of South America."

(From our own Correspondent.)

"Buenos Aires, Tuesday, 12.50 p.m.

"An amazing occurrence has happened. Soon after six o'clock this morning the yacht *Isola*, belonging to the well-known financier and millionaire, Mr. Isolo Staunton, who is the son of Mr. Staunton Zuarez, the late President of Peru, entered the harbour flying the flag of the newly-created United States of South America.

"Cables have come to hand during the morning which inform us that from Panama to Cape Horn and from Caracas to Monte Video, the same flag has been hoisted in every capital of the Continent.

"It is reported that there are hundreds of thousands of men under arms, and that no fewer than seven fleets of warships, the most up-to-date products of European shipyards, are already patrolling the entrances to every river and harbour which gives access to the New World Power which has so suddenly and so mysteriously sprung into being.

"From the best information that I have been able to gather here, I feel that I am justified in saying that this miracle of empire-making has been the work of one man."

"Well, upon my word," said Lady Medcalf-Mears. "What an extraordinary character the man must be, although, of course, no one could be surprised at anything he has done, or may do, after the amazing way in which he behaved to us. It was as extraordinary as it was scandalous."

"Certainly," said the Grand Duke, who had taken the paper from Kesteven and run his eye over the momentous paragraph.

"It is distinctly a dangerous situation, and from what I have been able to see of the character of our late host, he would be a desperate man if he found himself in a desperate position."

"There's not much doubt about that," laughed Cora, leaning back on the soft, springy cushions. "I reckon that if trouble has to be made, he would make it about as thoroughly as any man on earth."

"But surely," exclaimed Lady Medcalf-Mears, almost angrily, "it would be a perfectly disgraceful thing, a scandal to humanity as well as a disaster to the whole world, if this man's wicked ambitions led to war. The Great Powers ought to combine and crush him and his new Republic at once before he has time to do any mischief," she added somewhat inconsistently.

"But my dear lady," replied the Grand Duke, smiling at her fervour, "surely you do not see anything wicked in forming a new State, if it be done by lawful means. If that were so you would condemn every State and Empire on earth, and especially your own British Empire. For my part I confess that I have not a small admiration for the man who could make so great a *coup d'état* as that so secretly and so suddenly. No doubt he will behave himself peacefully, so that the Powers shall recognise him and the Constitution of his Republic. If he does not, then his quarrel with the world will be settled by war."

Here the carriage drew up at the Carlton, and the discussion perforce ended for the present.

(Another long instalment of this serial next week.)

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10/6 **Lustrous** diamond and ruby **Half-hoop Ring**, set with 5 matchless doublet rubies and 8 real diamonds; solid gold, hall-marked.

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6/9 **Brooch**; very handsome 18-carat rolled gold, 3 swallows in flight; set lovely turquoise and pearls in case.

21/- **Lady's** solid gold **Keyless Watch**, jewelled in 10 rubies, beautifully engraved case, splendid time-keeper; 10 years' written warranty; week's free trial.

8/6 **Fashionable Long Neck-chain**; genuine 18-carat rolled gold (stamped), beautifully finished; very choice design.

9/6 **Organ Toned Melodeon**; magnificent 26/- instrument. 12-fold bellows (metal bound), 3 sets steel bronze reeds, and 4 acting stops, including Tremolo and Diapason action; rich powerful tone, perfect order.

9/6 **Necklet** with **Heart Pendant**, very pretty Princess of Wales rope pattern; heart set with pearls and turquoise.

12/6 **Magnificent 5-row Pearl Collarette**; finest quality, mounted with four bars of lustrous Orient diamonds, in velvet-lined case.

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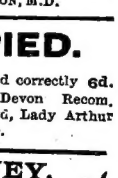

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Conducted by CYNTHIA.

[In this page are answered any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must be addressed to Miss Cynthia Hamilton, c/o the Editor of SHORT STORIES.*]*

Writing on Photos.

"Is it correct, on a gentleman presenting his photo to a young lady to whom he is engaged, for him to put his inscription on it? In the event of writing on the photo, would it be permissible to put 'with fondest love'?"—"LOVESICK."

* * * * *

I do not know that it is correct to write on a photo. It is a matter of taste. Many people insist that all their photos should be signed—it is a little fad—while others prefer the photo without writing. Ask your sweetheart if she would like you to write on the photo, and if she agrees, you might use the words you mention. Above all, don't be too keen on being "correct." Be natural, that is the important point.

Nine Years, and Not Engaged.

DEAR, dear, "DOROTHY"! You have been going out with a young man for nine years and he has never uttered a word about marriage. Well, though nine-year friendships are very nice, certainly you have a right to expect him to say one way or the other if he has serious intentions. You say he is always affectionate and kind, that you have spent holidays together, and that everybody thinks you are properly engaged, and that he is quite in a position to marry. Well, one of these days, I certainly should gently point out to him that your friends are making inquiries about the matter, and leave him to say the needed word. A nine-years' engagement is bad enough, but nine years and no engagement is a bit too much of a good thing.

Sweethearts Who Are Not In Love.

"WHAT is a girl to do when she feels that she no longer loves her *fiancé*, but has a decided preference for somebody else?" Several correspondents lately have put me this question, so I will answer them together. They will not, I am sure, be offended if I do not deal with each one separately, and thus cover the same ground several times over.

* * * * *

If a girl no longer loves the man to whom she is engaged, it is her duty to tell him so. To enter into marriage, knowing well all the time that your affection lies elsewhere, is almost as serious an offence as being untrue to your husband after marriage—and it often means the same thing. Remember that one of the marriage vows is "love." This reminds me of a very charming play I saw recently. An engaged young couple both discovered that they no longer cared for each other but preferred others. But because they were engaged, they solemnly kept up the pretence of continued love, all the time hoping for some reason for a breach. Fortunately for their happiness the breach took place, and instead of either of them being broken-hearted, both were exceedingly pleased. In the case of my correspondents, who knows but that the young men they are engaged to are not every bit as anxious to end the affair as they themselves? Certainly nothing would be lost by telling the plain truth.

Whereabouts Wanted.

"E. S." asks if I know of a lady who used to write under the name of "Cynthia" in 1899, and who used to often go to South Africa. No, I do not, but if I should hear of her, I will place a paragraph on this page against your initials. If she should see this, she might communicate with me, and I will notify you of her whereabouts, if she wishes to disclose them.

Should She Receive Letters?

YOU got friendly with a young man while on your summer holiday, did you, "RAB"? Since his return he has been sending little remembrances. But you are now "keeping company" with somebody else, and want to know if you should still receive letters from the other.

* * * * *

You can receive letters from anybody if you are on friendly terms with them. But if he writes love letters to you, I think you had better just tell him that you are "keeping company" with another. That would be only fair to him, would it not. For if you continued to receive letters and presents he might very rightly think that he was the only one.

Secret Marriages.

"I AM privately engaged to a girl of eighteen, but her parents are against our marriage," writes "BOB." "We are determined to marry in a year's time. How can this be done?"

* * * * *

I never advise young couples to marry against the wishes of either parents. Instead of conspiring for a runaway match, it would be far better for you to spend the next year in convincing her parents of your fitness to become her husband. Runaway matches are, no doubt, very romantic, but somebody suffers from them after the rapture is over. So I am sorry, "BOB," that I cannot help you with any suggestion.

Unanswered Letters.

SOME troubled lovers seek my advice on very slende grounds, but I suppose they are seriously worried, or they would not write. For instance, "A. E. W." got very friendly with a certain young lady a month ago, and they went for long walks together, after which she went away to her home. She promised to write to "A. E. W." if he wrote first. Three days after "A. E. W." wrote, but received no reply. Three weeks have now elapsed, but nothing has come from her.

* * * * *

Write again, "A. E. W." If she doesn't write back then, it will be very rude indeed of her, and I should consider the affair closed. But give her one more chance. Every young man in love should persevere.

Engaged to Another Fellow.

"KRUGER" (South Africa), writes: "A young lady I am very fond of writes to me weekly. I know she is engaged to another fellow, but she tells me in her letters from England that she is also very fond of me. I should much like to become engaged to her, although I don't want to injure the other man."

* * * * *

Of course you cannot suggest any engagement to her, so long as she belongs to another. She ought not to worry you by writing in the way she does. That kind of girl seems to be playing a double game. Cannot you find out from other people whether or not she is likely to continue engaged to the other man? Perhaps there has been a breach, and she is writing to you in this strain because she anticipates that she will soon be in need of a new lover. I would find out definitely before even thinking about an engagement.

Cynthia

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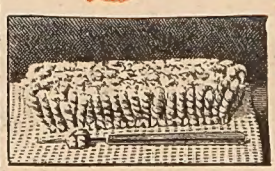

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